Try Not To Be Scared

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Try Not To Be Scared

by transcryptidone

Summary

Will and Duncan are just two loners attending high school together. They spend time together, fuck, and do their best to ignore everyone else – until something changes and their world becomes bigger than just the two of them.

Notes

So, I thought I'd try something out for this fic. I've decided to use they/them pronouns for Will and do my best to never describe the specifics of Will's sex characteristics. I'm also going to imagine this in a world where it's no big deal if a person is genderfluid and/or uses they/them pronouns. This fic will not include *any* misgendering or anything of that sort. There will be plenty of angst, but, as a trans and non-binary person, I want to keep the kind of hurt I associate with transphobia/misgendering out of it.

Also, this fic is tagged underage because both Will and Duncan are under 18 and I wanted folks to be able to filter that out if they wished.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The toilet makes a whooshing noise as Will flushes it. The stall door creaks and Will's boots fall heavily against the linoleum floor. Will approaches the sink with a bag on their hip that feels far heavier than it was this morning. When they'd gotten dressed, they thought that wearing their favorite shirt would offer some comfort for the day ahead. But now, the lace feels constricting and scratches against their flushed, sweat-damp skin.

They splash water on their face once their hands are clean and as the water falls and drips back into the sink, there might be some tears that go too. They dry their face with a paper towel and wipe away any other evidence that their fellow students might dissect like specimen. They pull a red and black plaid shirt from their bag and slip their arms in the sleeves. There's a lingering smell of smoke that clings to the collar. That smell of toxins and quite possible death has become their favorite, most comforting smell and Will doesn't know what they'd do if that changed.

Will isn't thinking – they haven't been thinking right for a while, *that's the problem* – and their distraction has them colliding with someone as soon as they leave the bathroom. They duck their head as they pull the top layer of their shirt tighter around them and they cringe when they see their chunky, black boots beside another pair of boots with pointed toes, one blue, one red. Will knows what that means.

"Sorry," Will says right away. *Preemptive strike.*

"Hello, there," Sindy says with her overly sweet voice and tone, and the others who are always near Sindy – always near *each other* – all laugh. "You should probably get the fuck out of here, sweetie."

"Just *talking* to us makes Will nervous," Hilde observes. *Patronizing.* She always tips her head up just so she can turn up her nose and look down on anyone and everyone she wishes to.

Will's not nervous. That's the thing – at least not *really*. They accepted long ago that they *wouldn't* be accepted by their peers and especially not the *A Team*. So, Will isn't sure they can truly be *nervous* about something they never had any expectation of achieving. What Will *can* for sure say they feel is *wary* and if they've learned anything, it's better just to say nothing at all.

"Still not a word, hmm?" Hilde continues in her mockery. "Maybe next year we'll get you talking."

"Come on," Sindy groans as she curls her shoulders in and slumps over in a dramatic performance of impatience. "Let's get out of here. I'm *hungry*."

Sindy stomps her feet as much as she can in those heels as she continues her way down the

hallway and Will is left to just watch the group of them go like Will might watch a bullet they'd managed to dodge. When the five of them turn down another hallway, there is Duncan just at the corner. He's dressed in all black – a stark contrast to the bright colors on the fliers that decorate corkboard. He also stands out from the duller gray of the walls. Will and Duncan look at each other, but neither of them does so much as nod or wave. When the bell rings, they go their separate ways.

Will finds him later. He's smoking under the bleachers like always. With how often he's there, it would be easy to believe that Duncan never goes to class, but Will knows Duncan has never risked failing. Will knows every assignment is turned in as it should be and even if Duncan seems like the shadow at the back of the class, a shadow at least means he's *there*.

Duncan hardly looks up at Will as they come closer, but he's sure to have heard them. He knows the routine by now – or he knows Will knows it. Duncan holds up the cigarette, perched between two fingers, as an offering. Sometimes Will allows Duncan to bring it to their lips for them. Other times, like now, Will takes care of it themself. They take the lit cigarette from Duncan's fingers and watch the smoke trail behind as they drop it to the ground. The little flame dies out under the toe of Will's boot.

Duncan's complaint is only the quietest of grunts and a very slightly sharper look in his eyes. The change is so minimal that Duncan's hair could have hidden it if his bangs fell a little further in front of his eyes. Even in the shade of the bleachers, he must be burning up underneath all of his black clothing – *Will sure is* – but as always, Duncan wouldn't show it.

Will stands next to him, leaning back against where two of the bleacher's support beams cross each other – *X marks the spot*. "Is Vivian still having a party at your place tonight?"

"Yeah," Duncan states. When he looks down at Will, he's looking down only because he's taller. Duncan has hit his growth spurt and then some. His cheekbones stand out on a face that has ditched most of its baby fat and he already has the ability to grow quite a bit of stubble. "You still want to come over?"

Will tries to not take too deep of a breath, but not too shallow either. They also try not to sigh too hard or too loudly when they say, "Yeah."

Duncan hums and nods and Will can see out of the corner of their eye how his fingers twitch for the cigarette that's stamped into the gravel. Will drops their hand down by his and brushes their fingers against the backs of Duncan's. What Will sees out of the corner of their eye then is a smirk on Duncan's face that matches Will's own.

Their little spot of peace is interrupted by the blare of many bells ringing at once. They can hear the clamor of students shouting and running and jumping for joy. *School's out!* Their fellow students celebrate the arrival of summer and, with it, a few months of few cares beyond avoiding a sunburn.

Will and Duncan watch from a distance. With Duncan dressed all in black and with his dark hair that has grown to hang down around his face and with Will dressed their own dark black jeans seemingly torn in about as many places as not, together they might seem like the

overlapping shadows that are cast off just when their peers find themselves bathed in light. Will and Duncan linger until the only cars in the parking lot are their two. The engines rumble in the same sort of way when they turn out onto the road and drive off separately back towards what each of them could call home.

Will's dad isn't home when they get there and he still hasn't gotten back by the time they leave again. Their dad works longer hours at this job than he did at his last one, but at least the pay is good. Will hopes this job can also last longer than most of the ones that came before. Their dad hardly seems to have a job longer than a season and with the weather getting warmer and warmer, Will doesn't want to come home to find out that they'll be moving again. That's at least something that makes it feel better for their dad to be away so much.

Will had changed out of the lace when they were home and replaced it with a much more billowy black t-shirt. As they walk towards Duncan's house, the summer air cools and breezes across their skin until the chill of their sweat makes them shiver. They dig their nails into the goosebumps that raise on their arms until they know there will be little crescent-shaped indents left behind.

The party is already in full swing. Will made sure to wait until the time of night that's suitable for a party full of underage drinking and its many consequences. Will is no stranger to that. They don't always drink, but when they do, it's usually whiskey – except for that one time when Duncan had *Mount Gay* rum so, of course, Will felt compelled to drink *a lot of it*. Will still remembers that night fondly even though the consequences might prove particularly *disastrous*. Will wishes their biggest problem could be something like breaking a vase that's unreasonably expensive or even getting into a fight. Vases could be paid for somehow and bruises would heal sooner rather than later.

Will doesn't bother with the front door. There's a group of their fellow no-longer-juniors clogging up the entrance, but it doesn't matter. Will walks around to the side of the house like they have many times before. Duncan's bedroom is on the ground floor, thankfully, and he leaves the window cracked open when he knows Will is coming.

Will presses the heels of their hands to push the window pane up enough to slip their fingers underneath and open it the rest of the way. They then brace their arms and lift themselves up far enough to climb in. Though repetition has etched the motion into their muscles and somewhere deep in the back of their mind, Will feels their body differently this time than they ever have before. Each shift seems more significant and any amount of effort has something extra to it. The lift of their knee as high as it will go seems all the more exaggerated and they're careful not to knock into anything as they lean in through the window.

Duncan's gotten used to Will coming in this way too. He hardly reacts now when Will's boots hit the floor and as long as Will locks the window again, Duncan doesn't even usually feel the need to get up from his bed anymore. He's got another cigarette letting off a trail of smoke as he brings it to his lips, then it disappears when Duncan breathes in and the red at the end glows brighter.

Will sets their saddlebag on the floor, sits on the edge of the bed, and unlaces their boots enough to yank them off. They can hear the sound of beer sloshing in a bottle as Duncan takes a swig. When Will leans back against the headboard, Duncan offers them the drink with one hand and the smoke with the other. Will takes the bottle and sets it aside on the dresser by the bed, then takes the cigarette and puts it out in the dish on the table by Duncan's side. Duncan has that questioning look in his eyes again and so Will allows their body to press further against his so that they can press one of many kisses to his lips.

Duncan makes no complaint about that – never has. He threads his fingers into the curly hair that has grown just a little past Will's shoulders. As he pulls their hair back away from their face and neck, Will's sigh comes from deep within their ribcage. One tug from Duncan's hand in Will's hair can send a cascade of prickling, shivering pleasure down Will's spine and they both know that. They both know that like they both know that a feather-light touch of Will's fingers along Duncan's side and up his chest can have him gasping too. To Duncan, what's gentle is what's most drastic. Tenderness would have to be the only way to get a rise out of him considering how pain doesn't startle him one bit.

Duncan pulls Will's hair to guide them to lean back and lie flat against the mattress. They follow where Duncan's hold leads them and they tip their neck up and back the way he likes. Duncan has learned just how much Will's neck has been their weakness. A few kisses, a few hickeys, some presses of his teeth and he can be almost guaranteed to have Will exactly where he wants them. But Duncan is never one to play it safe or fall short. His other hand also slips its way underneath Will's shirt – and with little resistance at that. Will has grown to expect the rub of a rough thumb at their nipple but that doesn't change or lessen how it makes them feel.

Will moans loudly and, despite the pounding cacophony of music shaking through the house, they still might hear the moan echo back into their ears. It's a desperate sound that only stutters and fades out as it becomes a whimper when Duncan shifts to cover more and more of their body with his own. They spread their knees wider so that he can settle in between their thighs. They can feel the bulge of his cock as Duncan's restraint falters and his hips grind down with an eagerness for friction and touch.

"Duncan," Will gasps as their breath pants with how much they *want*.

Will wants out of their restricting clothes. Duncan's aren't quite as tight, but they want him out of his too. Their hands grab at Duncan's back and catch handfuls of his shirt in their grip. They drag the fabric up high enough to touch the skin at Duncan's lower back just above the thick leather belt at his waistband.

Just as Will is about to either make demands or *beg*, the dulled thrum of the noise and music downstairs gets suddenly much clearer and louder. Duncan's door swings open fast enough and clumsy enough for the doorknob to hit harshly against the wall with a loud crash. Two very drunk partygoers seem to be too far gone to recognize their own ruckus and bad behavior. These interlopers only have enough attention to focus on stumbling and trying to catch themselves from falling face-first onto the floor.

As quickly and suddenly as they arrive, Duncan pushes himself out of bed and grabs a

shoulder in each of his strong, broad hands to shove the partygoers swiftly and surely out the door. The slam of the door closed is as loud as it had been when it was opened. Duncan then drags a large black and silver trunk in front of the door to block it. Will knows that trunk is heavy with all of Duncan's most prized possessions, though Will can't say they've really seen what's inside it.

Duncan crawls back onto the bed and back in between Will's legs. All had been said and done before Will had even thought to shift their knees to close them. Will's laughter comes almost out of nowhere – or at least that's what it feels like – but, even so, Duncan joins in without so much as blinking first. The sight and sound of his laughter might never get old. Meanwhile, Will can feel the pointier edges of their teeth cutting into their lip as the laughter shakes at the rock that seems to sit in their chest where their heart would be.

Will turns their head to the side as they ask, "What are we doing?"

Duncan kisses Will's neck again and hums a noise just as scratchy as his stubble against the sensitive skin. "Whatever you want."

Will grips their hand in the slightly oily hair at the back of Duncan's head. "No, I mean—" Will starts and then they pause to lick their lips. They close their eyes and take a deep breath in to push down on the pressure that has been trying to crush the air in their chest. Their exhale isn't as steady as they would like and their words wobble even more as they ask, "Are we just keeping each other from feeling lonely?"

Duncan's lips pause at Will's throat. "Not *just*," Duncan rasps as he pulls back. Will doesn't have to open their eyes to know they're being looked at and *observed*. "What's this about?"

Although Will would rather not, they open their eyes again. Although they'd rather not face Duncan's scrutiny, if they want to feel like they really *know,* they're going to need to *see* it. "Are we together?"

"We could be," Duncan replies by way of an answer. "Is that what you want?"

"Yeah," Will confesses and it does feel like a *confession* even though it's not exactly the hardest thing they'll have to say.

Duncan hums. "Then that settles it."

Another laugh escapes from in between Will's teeth and, though it's just as sudden and startling as the round of laughter before it, this laugh also feels *frantic*. Duncan said what Will wanted to hear – what they *needed* to hear. But the possibility that everything might disappear just as soon as it's been established might make the stakes feel even higher, even more of a *risk*. Will's never done well with getting excited for things and has had a lot more experience with being disappointed.

Will licks their lips again and tries to harness the confidence they might find in the alcohol they could taste on Duncan's lips. "Now that we're together, I guess I should tell you something," Will forces themself to say. Their eyes flutter in an anxious blink as Duncan's

gaze so easily feels *overwhelming*. “Or, I would have told you either way, but now you should *definitely* know.”

Duncan furrows his brows and in a way Will knows is intended to offer some sort of comfort, simply says, “Will.”

“Hold on,” they say as they push back against Duncan’s chest and, as soon as they have enough space, they roll over on the bed to grab their bag from the floor.

Their fingers fumble to pop the snap that keeps it closed and without looking at what they are doing, they rummage their hand around the inside until they find what they’d hidden there. Will keeps the *damn thing* closed in their fist and still doesn’t look at it even as they press it into Duncan’s open hand.

“Will,” he almost whispers and the rumbling sound of it makes Will flinch.

They duck their head as they whisper back, “I know.”

Even though the sounds from the party still render silence very much impossible, Will wouldn’t know how else to describe the absence of sound that comes when Duncan says nothing more.

Will presses their hand open wide and flat against the comforter underneath them. This has become familiar to Will over the course of many visits and encounters. This comforter has laid underneath them as Will and Duncan lounged together, bunched up as their bodies pressed together and collided, and then extended out again to cover them while they slept. As Will takes a deep breath, they feel how soft it has become with many washings. As they breathe out, they curl their fingers and grab a lump of it in their fist.

“What are you thinking?” Will asks, finally breaking their pseudo-silence.

“What do you want to do?”

When Will looks back up at Duncan, he’s as unreadable as he’s ever been and there’s a stab of worry that pierces through their chest. “I need to know what you’re thinking first.”

Duncan’s fist closes around what Will gave him, but not in an angry sort of way – as far as Will can tell. “I’m not going to think anything until I know what you want.”

That’s the big question, isn’t it? That’s the question Will has been considering since their lunch break was spent less on lunch and more on staring down at the two lines on a *stupid piece of plastic.* What do they want? They want this not to be happening. Not like they want to get rid of it, but like they want to not have to make a decision at all.

They want to go back to when they drank too much Mount Gay rum and when they felt drunk and giddy and *gay* and drowned themself in how good it felt to be *so gay* and *with Duncan*. Will wouldn’t have changed any of those parts. What Will wishes they could do would be to find a way to change that the condom broke and how neither of them noticed until the next

morning.

But since they can't change any of those things, they *do* have to make a decision. Will spent all afternoon and evening coming to the same conclusion and then starting over again.

"I don't want to get rid of it," Will admits. "But I don't think I can keep it."

Duncan leans over to set aside the damning dollar store test – cheap to buy, but the results couldn't be more costly. Duncan's hand on Will's shoulder is hesitant like he doesn't know if he has permission. Will rests their hand on top of his to reassure him. They let their hand fall away again as Duncan shifts to press his palm against their cheek, which burns under his touch.

"You can keep it," Duncan declares solemnly.

"Duncan," Will sighs and feels themself deflate with their exhale.

"You can," Duncan says with more deep sincerity. "I know it."

"How?" Will asks with a laugh that could easily turn into a sob. In all their thinking and *thinking*, the *how* has been what they can't seem to figure out.

Duncan hums as he brushes his thumb across the soft roundness that has lingered at Will's cheek. "I just know."

Duncan tips Will's face up and brings their lips together. It's much less desperate or hungry than before. Will would never have described either of them as *carefree*, but they realize there must have been some shred of *carefreeness* in them because they can feel how it has been lost now.

They press further into Duncan's kiss and try to feel his words as clearly as they feel his lips. Will smells the cigarette smoke that they have come to associate with comfort and feel the touch of hands that they associate with strength and care. In this, they try to find the strength and care that might help them to believe what Duncan says could be *true*.

"I promise," Duncan whispers in reassurance just as Will might falter.

Will wants *so badly* to believe he's right.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The river rushes and trickles. There are a few splashes that could be fish, carefree when Will is without a fishing rod in their hand. And though Will might have enjoyed casting their hook and getting the satisfaction of a good catch, they didn't bring Duncan to the river today with the intention of just going fishing.

Light filters in through the leaves, which are still green and plentiful with the last days of summer. Soon they'll start to wither and fall with the start of autumn. The sunlight is strong enough to give a glow against Will's eyelids as they close them. The sun still burns hot enough for Will to be grateful that they're deep enough in the forest that they could risk taking their jacket off.

Will's never cared much for summer, but this one seems extra hellish with the increasing need for *layers*. They could get away with flowy shirts and dresses for a while, but it seems that it's just when the weather is at its hottest that Will's gotten big enough to need something bulkier to create a shape that distracts from the increasing curve of their belly.

"I wish I didn't have to act ashamed," Will says, keeping their eyes closed and settling deeper into the grass they're lying on top of. "I wish it wasn't still possible for me to get my hopes up and be disappointed."

Duncan hums and Will imagines they can feel how the rumble shakes the ground underneath them. Duncan doesn't have to say it for Will to know that means: *I wish it too*.

Will slides their hand between the blue jean of their overalls and the white cotton of their t-shirt to touch along the curve of their belly. At nearly halfway through, it's *just* tipping over into *too round*. As they lie there in the grass with their eyes closed, they feel over the curve of it like they do in bed at night. Will sometimes feels like their belly and the baby within it never get to see sunlight.

"This baby can't possibly have parents this jaded," Will remarks as they open their eyes and stare up at the blanket of interlocking leaves above them. "Aren't parents supposed to preserve their child's hope?"

Duncan's hum that time is shorter and sharper – *hm*. The breath he pulls in is just as stilted and it seems caught in his chest as he says, "I wouldn't know."

Will sighs on both their behalf. They feel how the air rushes out and deflates them. "I guess I wouldn't either."

Duncan's silent for a good long while. For the first half of that long while, Will is content to lie with him in the feeling of *there's nothing good to say to that.* Eventually though, Will can

no longer overlook how the silence is *lasting* and that's when they turn their head to look at him. Duncan looks the opposite of comfortable. He looks like the ground is covered in rocks and he's not wearing sunglasses. He looks like he sleeps with a frown on his face.

"Come here," Will says and when Duncan doesn't move a muscle, they pull their hand away from their belly to reach over and give him a nudge. "Duncan, come here."

Duncan blinks his eyes open again and turns to look at them. He nods his head once before scooching himself over to align right along Will's side. Duncan hasn't smoked around Will since he found out about their *predicament*. He puts his cigarette out as soon as he sees Will coming. But, even with all of Duncan's precautions, Will can still smell how the smoke clings to him.

Will unbuckles the two buckle loops by their shoulders. Once those are free, they push down the front of their overalls and pull up on the shirt underneath, pushing aside layers so the baby can know a bit of sun even if just for a little while before they have to cover up again.

For the first few weeks after the existence of their baby became known to him, Duncan seemed to either not think to touch Will's belly or too hesitant to actually do it. It had been perhaps too abstract when Will still wasn't really showing and then when their belly truly started to curve, Duncan might not have been sure what would be allowed. The freedom they'd previously had with each other's bodies seemed reverently altered. But after Will has guided his hands enough times, Duncan's finally gotten the message.

Duncan's hand can no longer seem to hold all of Will's belly within his grasp, but he still gives it his best try. As he slides his hand across the bottom of the curve, Will's shiver couldn't possibly come from any chill in the air.

"I want to imagine something nice for once," Will says as they rest their hand on top of Duncan's. "I want to imagine what it would be like to feel hopeful and not be ashamed of it."

Duncan's eyes slide closed and he shifts to rest his cheek against Will's shoulder. Will closes their eyes too and tries to not feel too strange about it. In many ways, this is the opposite of what is usual. Far more often than they would like, Will has found themself at school thinking of the stream. Far too often, they've tried to convince themself to imagine the stream in order to distract from anything else. Now, here by the side of that very stream, Will instead tries to imagine the first day of school.

It's easy to imagine the first day of school might feel the same as today in temperature and sunshine. The clamor of students would be much louder. With sneakers squeaking on the newly waxed floors and locker doors slamming as another year's worth of books is put away, there would be no chance to hear anything so slight as the rush of water. Will can envision it all with the clarity of prior experience, but when they try to imagine themself…

"If I was hopeful, I could wear whatever I wanted," Will muses. They laugh and crane their neck a bit so that they can rest their cheek against Duncan's hair. "Maybe I'd wear this since I know how you like it."

Duncan chuckles because they both know that's true. Will's never asked why Duncan likes this particular getup so much and Duncan might not even know what to say if they did. Will doesn't blame him. They wouldn't know what to say either because they too just know that they like it.

When Duncan's hand shifts ever so slightly – barely more than a twitch of his fingers – Will pulls back their hand to let Duncan's roam free. The slight callouses drag a bit against skin that's sensitive from how it stretches.

"Would it be too hopeful to hope I could touch you this way?" he asks.

Will smiles as the touch that started off innocently curious starts to take a turn. Duncan shifts his legs a certain sort of way when he's starting to feel randy. He says Will does something similar in how their breath stutters when desire hits *just right*.

"*That* might be a stretch," Will teases and their smile becomes a smirk. "A touch here or there when I'm at my locker or on the way to class might be reasonable. Only as many times as people would believe you were just feeling for the baby kicking."

Duncan hums and shifts again to nose at Will's neck until they tip their chin up like he wants.

Since Duncan confessed too high of a hope, Will does too: "It's too much to hope no one would notice."

"They could just keep on not caring," Duncan rasps against Will's throat.

Will hums as they cup their hand around the back of his hair. They intertwine fingers in between the strands as they consider, "How do we take what we can from what we've got."

"You can have my sweatshirts," Duncan offers as he pushes more of Will's clothes away to expose more of their skin. He parts the fabric and pushes it aside until their shirt bunches high up on their chest and their overalls are as low as they can be on their hips.

Will closes their eyes as the air in their lungs comes out in a stilted series of panting breaths. The image in their imagination shifts to one of themself in one of Duncan's sweatshirts that's already baggy on *Duncan*. He's not wearing one today, which says something if even *Duncan* feels the heat. But Will's seen and felt Duncan's vast collection of mostly-black sweatshirts before. They know those sweatshirts are currently large enough to seem almost like a dress on them, but might feel less so over time.

"I'll feel like I'm *yours*," Will sighs as Duncan kisses at their neck.

"You are."

Duncan's hand pulls against Will's hip at one side as the bulge of the cock trapped in his pants rubs against their thigh on the other side. Will whimpers with how they both want to turn their neck enough to kiss him and wouldn't dare to direct his lips anywhere other than

exactly where they are right now.

Duncan's fingers then tease at the elastic of Will's underwear, tucking just underneath the edge. "If we're already hidden, I might as well still touch you like this."

Will gasps as they arch their back into his touch and encourage the tips of fingers down further. "I suppose that's true."

Duncan catches the skin of Will's neck between his teeth. He doesn't bite down hard enough to leave a mark, but it's enough to remind them that he *could*. Duncan has left behind a purpling bruise from time-to-time. He hasn't recently so as to spare Will from *also* having to wear something with a *high neck*. They need to at least be able to spare them *one* sort of extra layer.

"It's nicest when it's just the two of us," Duncan rasps, his throat perhaps crying out for a cigarette he hasn't been able to smoke for at least the past hour.

"Yes, it is," they agree easily, but not without a sigh.

Will smiles as their baby starts to twist and shift under their skin. It's a feeling Will still hasn't gotten used to. It's still a fairly new development and lacks enough of a pattern to become expected. Will sometimes finds themself freezing in whatever they're doing for fear that the little movements might get scared off. Even though they know it's something they might come to wish would *just calm down already*, for now it still feels like it may never happen *enough*.

Will directs Duncan's hand back to the place on their belly where little fists or feet learn what it's like to move. Duncan's hand settles right above even though Will still isn't sure if their baby is strong enough yet for him to feel. Will then touches their hand to Duncan's cheek, brushing their thumb against the grain of his stubble.

"I'm not ashamed of our baby," Will says.

"Neither am I."

Will looks back up towards the canopy punctuated with sunlight. As their heart pounds in their chest, they can't say for sure exactly why. But it's both heartening and disheartening. They take a deep breath and hold it so that they might focus in on the space within their ribcage and force their heart towards something calmer.

"I won't let them make me feel ashamed of our baby," Will promises both of them – the *three* of them.

"Me neither," Duncan promises too.

Will scratches their nails against Duncan's scalp as they consider. They try to enjoy the feeling of sunshine on their face instead of wondering how long it will take for it to burn. "I guess if I'm being hopeful for their sake, that might make it worth it to feel disappointed

sometimes," Will offers. "At least then the pain *means* something."

Duncan hums and Will might feel the rumble of it through their veins. His voice holds that power even as his whisper is *so quiet*. "That might make it feel better that I'm hopeful for you."

The surge of sensation Will feels isn't desire exactly and doesn't have breath stuttering from their chest. It grips at their heart in a sensation that *hurts*, but they know it's because of something so *painfully good*.

Will presses a kiss to Duncan's hair, dry but still smelling like his shampoo. "You really are just a sweetheart, aren't you?"

Duncan gives a singular, gruff laugh at that. "You'd be the only one to think so."

Will presses another kiss more firmly and with extra determination as they declare, "Well then everyone else must simply be *tasteless."*

Chapter End Notes

People who read Let Slip! too might notice that I will forever want Will to call Duncan "sweetheart." What can I say? That nurse calling Duncan "sweetie" in his first scene in the movie really just set the tone for me.

Also, thank you to everyone who has read this fic and commented! It warms my heart.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's hands rub against the grit of chalk dust on the blackboard in front of them. The trail their fingers left behind might be as damning as what's sure to be a white line of chalk across the front of their black sweatshirt – *Duncan's sweatshirt*. Duncan himself is plastered against Will's back, pressing their bodies together with near reckless abandon.

If anyone were to enter the room, they would know that Will and Duncan were doing something they shouldn't be. Unwelcome eyes might be able to see how there are hands slipped underneath clothes to touch at bare skin. But they wouldn't be able to see how Duncan's hand under their sweatshirt holds at Will's belly. They might just assume his hand was down their pants. To be fair, maybe it will be.

Duncan's hands grasp like a man possessed – determined, demanding. If anyone were to see them, they'd think Duncan had been the one to drag them in here. They might think something had managed to take over Duncan so nearly completely that even his usual steadfastness might falter. Will can admit that they like the idea of being able to accomplish that. In truth, it had been Will's hands grasping and pulling Duncan into the dark of the abandoned "art" room. A chalkboard and some easels would hardly seem to suffice. If only the two of them had a true darkroom to disappear into instead…

Duncan's hand risks rising a bit higher, creeping the hem of his sweatshirt farther and farther up until it threatens to expose skin to open air – from there skin could become exposed to plain sight.

"Duncan," Will sighs in warning. They squeeze their eyes closed with how they wished they didn't have anything to warn him about.

Duncan groans into Will's hair. He doesn't lower his hand – but he doesn't raise it any higher either. "You'll be the death of me," he grumbles, but only holds Will closer.

Will grits their teeth at the recognition that Duncan is becoming more and more central to their *life* – maybe he's already as central as he can be. Will's never done well when they tried to rely on anyone's presence with any sense of *consistency*. Peers came and went sometimes even before they had a chance to becomes friends. Their dad was away as often as he was home – if not more.

The breath in Will's chest becomes less *pleasured* and more *panicked*. They try to remember that as parents-to-be Will and Duncan are *supposed to be* close. But all the imagined hope in the world won't make reality any different. Try as they might, what they see behind closed eyes looks more and more like *disaster*. If this risk somehow turned out to be the wrong one...

Will's whine is drowned out by the ring of the bell. Tears build behind their eyes but don't yet escape. Duncan's hands drag with his reluctance as he pulls away and Will either shivers or trembles – they can't be sure which.

They take the fabric of their sweatshirt in both hands. Just as they'd known there would be, there's a line dashed across the black fabric to bracket the swell of their belly. They fold it over to rub the chalky part against a cleaner one, knowing from experience that this will get rid of the mark much faster. That evidence hardly feels like anything in comparison to what could be, but any evidence also feels like too much of a risk. Will's had eyes on him before – and *unkind ones* at that. That's been something consistent; they're no *stranger* to it now. As much as they might wish they could be at peace with it, those eyes still manage to scratch and scrape in a way that only makes them itch *more* and *it's barely past lunchtime*.

Once the telltale chalk has been erased, Will reaches up to rub under their nose, hiding a sniffle in dust and the brush of their hand. Their nails scratch down across their lips to keep them from some sort of damning grimace. Though their lips may be barely restrained, Duncan's start to twitch in a way that shows he's deciding to say something.

Will shakes their head as they say, "Not now."

Duncan hardly needs encouragement to keep quiet. That's his status quo. He nods but Will flinches with the splash that echoes at the bottom of the well where Duncan's feelings usually are kept at barely a ripple. As a tear drips and falls to soak into Duncan's sweatshirt, Will could swear they hear another splash way down deep.

The clamor of voices in the hallway reminds them both of the time and place just outside the door. Will has Biology class to get to and Duncan has Spanish, though Duncan hardly needs the instruction. Will doesn't know how he picks up languages so quickly that it might seem like he always spoke them. He's acing French too. Meanwhile, Will doesn't know if their current predicament makes Will an *expert* in the ins and outs of basic biology or a demonstration of a fundamental inability to apply what they *should* know.

"You coming over after school still?" Duncan asks them. He starts to fold his arms over his chest, then catches himself and drops them down to hang in a performance of neutrality.

Will's smile is half-hearted, but it's there. "Yeah," they assure as they cup Duncan's cheek and brush their thumb over the shadows that come with the bags under Duncan's eyes, bags that are slowly but surely growing heavier than they had been already.

Will slips out the door first. Duncan will linger and wait for the necessary amount of time to pass for people to have lost any reason to notice a pattern worth commenting on. As Will walks out the door, they're thrown back into a harsher reality. The lights are brighter and leave no shadows to hide in. The floors are a white linoleum streaked with scuff marks from reluctant shoes shuffling to class.

In some ways, it's easy for Will to lose themself in the crowd. They can pretend they are just one of many, made anonymous by there being so many others around, one cog in one inefficient machine. They go through the motions. Will ducks their heads and curls in their

shoulders as they dip out of the stream of students to stop in front of their locker.

It's a bottom locker, unfortunately. As if it weren't enough to have to hide their belly, they also have to find new ways to crouch to the floor and still be able to get up again with any sort of grace. They have to force themselves to remember to not touch their belly as they bend their knees and lower themself down. They have to try to keep the hand that drags down the metal of the lockers as casual as it can be. They hope to make it seem more *absent-minded* than *desperately needed*.

The lock is simple by comparison and they have their locker door popped open in no time. They stack a heavy textbook and notebook on the floor by their feet. That's going to make it even more difficult to get back up again.

"New year, new you, Will?" Hilde's voice taunts from above.

Will closes their eyes and tries not to sigh. They pretend to need another notebook too so that they can delay having to stand up again. In the early hours of the very first day of school for the year, Will realized that their locker was unfortunately nearby the suit of lockers devoted to the A team. It certainly set a tone for how this year would embody *avoidance*. Will paid attention to when the A team would linger and when they would be busy elsewhere doing who-knows-what. Will made the mistake of lingering too long with Duncan and they're paying for it by overlapping with the A team's routine.

Will stays quiet, wishing they could disappear like a whisper into the crowd again. Duncan's sweatshirt hangs between the v-shape formed by Will's spread knees. The fabric curls ever so slightly around the curve that sits there deep in their pelvis and underneath, hanging so perilously, is their belly protruding to nearly touching their thighs. The slightest shift of open air seems damning.

"No," Sindy says petulantly, seeming like she just might stamp her heels against the ground and Will can almost *hear* her pout. It's as if Will is withholding one of her many early Christmas presents when she complains, "Still the same old one."

Hilde scoffs. "We'll get something out of you before we leave here," she says like it's a promise. "New school year resolution."

Will supposes the good thing about that is that there's *no rush*. It means the A team will leave them alone if only just for now. But for now is fine for the moment. It lets Will take a breath before they have to get themself upright again. However, even without the A team to watch them closely, Will still feels a heightened need to know exactly where their hands are and that they're not falling anywhere suspicious. They have to keep their fingers from moving by habit towards the place they so often find themself touching with a sort of surreal awe.

The tension manifests in an ache in their muscles. Throughout their last classes of the day, they clench their hands in fists. They grip until the skin feels tight and their nails dig in sharply and only then do they release them again. They do this over and over but still the tension won't work itself through. They *still* haven't accomplished relief by the time they return to their truck at the end of the day. They still can't risk it until they're far enough away

to get some distance from prying eyes. As they cruise down a familiar, winding road, they're afforded enough comfort and safety to drop a hand from the steering wheel to press against their belly. There's that *surreal awe* again, coming for them and chasing after them like déjà vu or nostalgia.

Will parks a little way down the road even though there are no other cars clogging the spaces nearer Duncan's house and there's no concern for blocking anyone into the driveway. Duncan doesn't have to volunteer the information for Will to know that Vivian won't be home anytime soon. She doesn't seem to be around all that often. She stops by for a party or a scolding and then takes off again before she can risk a headache. Will knows this not because Duncan's said anything, but based on what he *hasn't*. Will has hardly heard about Vivian and Will has seen even less of her. Will knows it's that way because Duncan prefers it. He won't say why.

For the moment, Will doesn't care about any of that. They can't climb in Duncan's window anymore, couldn't even if Duncan tried to boost them or give them a hand. They have to walk through the front door and without even the cover of night. They climb the front steps like anyone might normally do. The wood doesn't creak under their feet and the handrail doesn't threaten their palm with splinters. And yet, it seems wrong.

They're escorted back after Duncan opens the front door in some sort of maze in reverse - down the hallways in directions Will usually only sees the other way around. Even after Duncan's bedroom door clicks shut, they might still see the room from a slightly different angle than they ever have before.

It's not as if Will hasn't looked around Duncan's room before. They've tried many times to glean secrets from what Duncan *does* leave out for them to see. The colors are dark – no surprise there – and there's nothing particularly remarkable about the décor. It's sort of a mess like any teenager's room might be. There are some boxes sitting out and open, still not fully unpacked and settled in. There are textbooks, some half open and some seemingly neglected.

The room smells a bit more like weed and a little less like cigarettes than it might usually. Will wishes they could smoke too — weed or cigarettes, they wouldn't be picky. They wish they could let off some smoke like letting off some steam. As they settle onto the bed and lean back against the pillow, it smells ever so slightly like weed too. Will can see little black spots from where a tiny bit of ash fell. They pick at the ash marks with their nails and rub the smudges away with the tips of their fingers until the dark spots have nearly disappeared.

Duncan sits on the bed next to where Will's knees are bent and pointing towards the ceiling. He takes hold of one of their hands when there are no more spots to nitpick. His hands are rougher, nails cut short and blunt where Will's are a little longer and have a little of a sharper shape to them. Will curves their fingers to dig their nails into the solid strength of Duncan's hand instead of the soft fluff of his pillow.

"Will," Duncan prompts.

This time, when Will looks around the room, they see everything that *isn't there*. They close

their eyes and the furrow of their brow matches the way they squeeze tighter at Duncan's hand. The tears that betrayed Will earlier come back again no matter how tightly they close their eyes. Still, it's easier if they keep them closed.

"I'm not going to just be able to show up to the trailer *with a baby,*" Will expresses. Even if their dad did the impossible and accepted the presence of a *baby*, there's as little space for a crib there as there is in Duncan's room. "Even if we hide it the whole time, *then what?"*

The hand that's not gripped in Will's brushes a thumb gently under Will's eye. "It's always been better just the two of us," Duncan says. "Remember?"

"You're getting my hopes up," Will cries out as another tear falls to wet their cheek. Their breath catches in their chest and it only seems to feed the frenzy that they try *so hard* to temper. Their chest *aches* through their lungs and down to their heart. Their words are jumbled with how their lungs refuse to *give* enough to let them catch their breath. "You're getting my hopes up when this might be the kind of disappointment I'll never recover from."

"Will," Duncan says, kneeling in between Will's legs and pressing their thighs further apart with his knees. "Look at me."

Will opens their eyes but does it slowly. They look past the hint of a curve in the bunch of the sweatshirt's fabric and beyond the peaks of their knees. Situated beyond those peaks and the rolling hill is Duncan like the most solid mountain of all, dressed in another of his dark sweatshirts that Will might decide to take with them when they leave. Will watches as Duncan's hands grip surely but gently at Will's hips, urging them away from the pillows and headboard and up into his arms. Will lets themself be pulled and Duncan's hands drag up their back as they come closer.

Duncan presses his forehead lightly against theirs and Will can feel how their brows both wrinkle, almost matching. Duncan's voice is just above a whisper as he asks, "If I told you I'd take care of you, would you believe me?"

Will lets their sigh out through their nose. Their heart still pounds in their chest, leaving them feeling offbeat and wobbly, but even if Duncan's frowning, his hands are still strong. There's still power in his shoulders even as they slump.

"Maybe it's against all logic," Will muses with a scoffing laugh at themself, still a little watery on the tail end. "But I *want* to say yes."

Duncan huffs a laugh that could double as a hum. It lacks joy but retains its sarcastic sense of humor. "Then say yes."

Will cups their hands around the back of Duncan's neck, intertwining their fingers with the hair at his nape. Will presses their foreheads together a little *harder*. Will has long found it reassuring that Duncan's being is a quiet one. It has been soothing that what they receive from him is *nothing* like a clamor. But if there's any time they wish Duncan would be louder – or even *chatty* – that time would be now.

“You have to *convince me,*” Will urges.

Duncan stays as solid as bedrock as he states, “I don’t say things lightly.”

“Yes, I know,” Will agrees because there’s no doubting that’s true.

“I agree to what I know I can get done,” Duncan continues. “Nothing more.”

Will hums. “I know that too.”

Duncan shifts their faces until he can press his cheek to Will’s temple, which has Will tucking their face into his neck. “I don’t expect you not to have doubts,” Duncan says as he welcomes Will further into the cradle of his body. “But of those things, you can be certain.”

“When will I get to know about your great masterplan?” Will questions as they press their nose against Duncan’s throat. There they can smell what lies underneath all the smoke. It’s a deep, rich, mellow scent. “Will you tell me that at least?”

“I want to tell you now,” Duncan rasps. “I just haven’t been able to decide on the words yet.”

“The longer you wait, the harder it might be,” Will says with a sigh as they lean back to look again at Duncan’s face. They want so much for what they say to land true. “Wait for the perfect way to say it and it might never get said.”

Will feels as the truth of it falls heavily. They feel it as they can feel how the *pressure* acts as a stopper in Duncan’s throat. He doesn’t do something so obvious like stammer or choke on his words. The bags under his eyes might seem to just get deeper and darker in front of Will’s very eyes.

“It’s okay,” Will soothes when the silence that usually accompanies them kindly instead feels too cruel. Like Duncan had brushed away Will’s tears, Will now touches a thumb lightly to the line carving itself under Duncan’s eye. If only they could brush away the shadow as easily as they’d brushed away ash. “I’ll wait. You just have to *promise me*.”

Duncan nods. The rumble of his hum must break a chunk off of what blocks his throat. “I promised then. I promise now,” Duncan declares. “I’ll promise tomorrow too.”

Will loops their arms on top of Duncan’s shoulders and around his neck. They scooch closer with a clumsy lift of their hips and shift of their ass until their belly can press against Duncan’s – tight, round curve against a comparatively softer cushion. Their baby shifts with enough strength for them both to feel it as Will whispers against Duncan’s lips, *“Deal.”*

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is interested in more high school AU content, I started a Le Joe fic and you can find it here.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's a couch that's shown up underneath the bleachers and no one seems to notice or mind. It has a plastic tarp to cover it when it rains, but it still smells slightly musty. It might make Will worry for the baby if it didn't feel like every breath they took came from Duncan's lungs wherein anything nefarious would get filtered out and trapped with all the nicotine. There's the smell of rain still in the air, as well as the mud covering most of what would be the football field – too rain-soaked for gym class. Mr. Crawford sent them all into the gymnasium, probably to do a round of dodgeball. For obvious reasons, Will won't be joining in.

It leaves a nice quiet. Every so often a breeze might blow through, but no yells or shouts. The only noises made by anyone around are the sounds of hushed sighs and pleasured hums. Will gasps as Duncan slides his hand further up on their thigh. His fingers dip under the edge of one of their skirt's pleats. Will laughs with their next kiss. There's something special about making Duncan get handsy. Will might say they *love* being able to do that to him. They *haven't* said it, but they *might*…

Duncan's hand goes up just a bit further, pulling the pleated fabric up when it catches and bunches around his wrist. Being with Duncan like this – whether on this couch or at Duncan's house – has seemed more and more like the only *simple*, *easy* thing. Everything else creates a whirlwind in Will's head – *school? dad? money?* – and the only thing that might offer any sort of quiet is *Duncan*. He *is* the quiet and the serenity found in it, even when his hands are rough and his mouth tastes like smoke.

Duncan's body holds Will as if they were wrapped in a weighted blanket. He presses down on all of the nerves that make Will's skin feel either too small or too far removed – as if shriveling within themself. He holds them close with an arm resting under their head and looped down around their back. When they shiver it's not from anything like *cold*.

The next breeze cascades over whatever it can and sends goosebumps along the bottom curve of Will's belly and the backs of their thighs *just below* their ass. The sweatshirt Will wears drags up a bit further and so does their skirt as Duncan's fingers touch between their legs. Will moans into Duncan's mouth and he welcomes it, continuing to touch and rub with his fingers just the way Will likes.

"*Well, well, well*," Hilde's voice calls out, her voice fracturing their calm near-silence. "What do we have here?"

Will's heart might have turned to stone. It sinks in their chest while the rest of them comes alight with *panic*. Their hand jolts to yank their sweatshirt down while Duncan's hand moves as quick as it ever has to pull down on their skirt. It hardly matters.

Hilde watches them, laughing with no humor and only malice. Will keeps their head ducked but she must be smiling wide and indulgent when she sees how the couch's overly soft cushions offer no assistance as Will tries to push themself upright. They clench their jaw as Duncan silently lends his strength and Will can do nothing but accept. When Will feels Hilde's gaze settle on their middle, they think they may never be covered up enough ever again.

"I was expecting to find the two of you," she says, taunting and goading as she crosses her arms on her chest. "But *this* is certainly a big surprise, isn't it?"

"Why are you here?" Duncan asks her. His voice might be the gruffest Will's ever heard.

Hilde hardly acknowledges him. She just tips up her chin and looks down on Will. "Mr. Crawford said you need to stop skipping class," she announces and her smirk twists further. "He sent me to find you and I knew I just had to find where *Duncan* always is. Process of elimination and here you are."

"Don't tell anyone," Duncan insists, the gruffness so stern and firm.

"Now, now, Duncan," Hilde chides. "Don't you think Vivian would like to know?"

"Vivian will know what she needs to."

"Does it fucking matter?" Hilde says with another damning laugh. "That belly will tell everyone everything all on its own. All I'll be doing is hurrying it along."

The conversation seems to swirl around Will. The clamor in their head is only getting louder and louder – every question that has at best gone unanswered and at worst spiraled into imaginations of terrible possibilities. The breath that hitches in Will's chest is nothing like the ones Duncan pulled from them before; there's no serenity to be found. They can see Duncan out of the corner of their eye but won't let themself look any closer. Reaching for Duncan will only be seen by Hilde and be made worse.

When the bell rings, they keep their head down as they walk by both Hilde and Duncan. They try not to think about how this means Hilde will leave also. As soon as they enter the hallway, it's hard to think of *anything else*. They take their seat behind a desk and realize just then that they don't have anything with them – no books, pencils, or paper. It doesn't matter. They won't hear a word of what the teacher says or even catch a glimpse of what's written on the whiteboard.

All they hear are whispers and all they see are the notes being passed. One hand extends out from under a desk to take a folded little piece of paper and tucks back again to avoid getting caught. No one bothers to pass it to Will; no one ever does. When they feel eyes land on them, they can only assume the words scribbled on a wrinkled piece of notebook paper are all about them. *Did you hear Will is knocked up? Did you hear they couldn't keep their legs closed? Look! There's the belly!*

Will feels aware of everything *too much*. They can feel their cheeks and the turn of their lips

and the tears that gather at their eyelashes. They feel the air as it flows in and out but their chest, only *aching* and offering no relief. The desk feels too small. Any comfort that might come from being enclosed now makes them feel *trapped*. As they press their knees against each other, they feel their feet against the floor ready to run.

When the bell rings, they fight the urge to flee. They drag their fingernails against the top of the desk and watch their nail polish chip and flake off. Their curls hang down around their face but the flush of their blushing cheeks might as well burn through. It's only after the last person has left that Will lets themself brace their hands against the desk surface and push themself to their feet. They're woozy and disconnected. Each footstep doesn't feel like their own to take. They give a thought to going towards their locker with the books and everything hidden within. It doesn't seem to matter anymore.

Duncan's standing there at their locker, but Will's feet carry them past him and out the school's front door. Tears drip down their cheeks and sobs claw their way from Will's chest. Duncan doesn't try to follow. Part of Will knows that if he'd tried and if he'd touched Will, there would be no keeping themself together anymore. Sitting in their car, blotting tears on the sleeve of Duncan's sweatshirt, part of them also wishes Duncan would be there so their cries wouldn't echo so loudly in their ears without a shoulder to bury them in.

As soon as Will's eyes are no longer tear-filled and they can at least see the road in front of them, they turn their car on and drive. They don't know why they're driving away when there's nothing else for them to drive to. The trailer hardly seems to be where safety lies…

Chapter End Notes

(the next chapter is longer)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Will got back to the trailer, they didn't leave again.

Their dad wakes up before the sun comes up and heads out for work and doesn't come home until the sun has gone down and he's had a few rail drinks at the dive bar with his buddies. He doesn't really have any reason to notice that Will hasn't gone to school. In many ways, there's nothing different. Will still gets up after he's left and gets dressed before he comes home to make sure it *looks like* they went somewhere…when in reality they stay home.

They curl up in bed and stay under the covers for as long as they can tolerate. Even in the cooling autumn, the sun manages to get hot enough in the middle of the day for them to peel the layers of blankets back to allow their skin to feel the open air. As soon as the sweat cools and dries, they cover up again. They wish they could bury themselves under the covers, sink into the mattress, and disappear from the eyes that evoke the fear and dread of the monster under the bed.

The home phone rings – probably school questioning why Will hasn't shown up. The school might try calling their dad at work if they are determined to reach him. Luckily for Will, there's no calling him when he's out fishing. There has also been a knock or two on the door over the past couple of days, but those have gone ignored too. It could have been Duncan. Will couldn't say. They never answered. They're not even sure Duncan knows where exactly they live anyway.

Will wakes up when their dad gets up in the morning. There are the noises of cabinets opening and whirring as the water heats for the coffee pot. Will tries not to hear it as the coffee trickles. They don't need to be getting up now. They can feel how their shirt has ridden up above their belly. They try to be as subtle as they can be when they turn over in bed and pull their shirt down under their blanket.

There's tapping against their shoulder. They don't notice it at first and then they try to pretend to not have noticed it still. They hope that whatever chore their dad wants to be done can be written on a notepad on the fridge that's supposed to be for making grocery lists. Will doesn't think it's ever been used that way. Usually, it's just used as a reminder for Will to do the dishes or the laundry.

The tapping on their shoulder continues until it's a shake and Will knows there's no plausible deniability anymore. Will turns their head and brushes the hair from their face as their eyes crack open for the day.

"Dad?" they say as they rub the crusty bits from the corner of their eyes with their knuckles.

Their dad is dressed in his usual t-shirt and cargo shorts and with a baseball cap on his head.

He shaves his beard down to a goatee while the weather is still warm, but as it's getting cooler, he's started growing it out again. That's the predictability that he has to offer and it's only because there's predictability in how the seasons change.

"Come on," he says with his Louisiana accent that's endured even as they've moved. Will's accent never had time to settle in. Sometimes some of their vowels have the same length and cadence as their dad's but only sometimes.

"What?"

Their dad pats their shoulder and then stands up straighter. "We've got an errand to run."

Will furrows their brow and frowns as they lick across their dry lips. "I've got school."

"Just get dressed and we'll go."

Will waits until their dad has walked away to sit up in bed and even then makes sure the blankets are bunched just right around his hips – covered enough and casual enough. When their dad goes outside to smoke and drink his coffee, Will hurries as much as they can to change their clothes. It might only be a few seconds, but the time between being under the blankets and covered by Duncan's sweatshirt feels far, far too long. The way the smell of cigarettes drifts in more from the window than it clings to the fabric fibers also feels *off* in some way.

Will eats as much breakfast as they can manage as worry chokes at the back of their throat and makes every bite and swallow that much harder. When they finally go outside and join their dad on the steps, their dad drops his cigarette on the ground and doesn't even bother to stamp it out. It will wither and peter out on its own just like the rest of the cigarette butts littered there.

They both climb into the truck in silence and their dad turns on the radio as soon as they're out on the road. Classic rock songs play in between crackles of static and their dad sings along from time to time while Will stares out the window and watches the world go by. It's surreal to consider how it feels so much like the many hours on the road moving from there to here. Last time, their dad sang this tune he was the only person Will thought they'd ever have the chance to get used to – even if what Will is used to is mostly him being gone.

The scenery changes. Houses get closer and closer together. They are no longer kept apart by the untamed woods and forest even though they're driving *away* from the city.

Will looks at their dad and asks, "Where are we going?"

"We're almost there," he answers like he did every time Will asked *how much longer* after many, *many* hours of driving. He'd say that…and then there would be another couple of hours before they'd stop for a burger and Will could stretch their legs.

The song changes and it's one of his favorites. He sings again and Will looks back to the road. The turn signal clicks and then they turn, over and over until they turn into a

neighborhood of identical houses with identical, perfect lawns. People stand in their driveways chatting and kids play like some sort of idyllic wonderland.

“Dad?” Will asks looking towards him with a frown. “Why are we here?”

“We’re almost there,” he says again. And that’s it.

Will is left to watch as their dad turns into a driveway for a house so untouched by autumn that the few leaves that tumble over from another lawn might be the gossip for the rest of the season. There’s a woman there who is posing with a rake more than actually seeming to need to use it. She’s blonde and wears a hat to protect her fair skin from the sunlight. Her clothes are shades of light blue, the polo a little darker than the baby blue of her pants. She turns to smile and wave at them as Dad turns off the car.

Will looks over at their dad, both wearing clothes riddled with holes and stray threads. “Why are we here?”

Their dad huffs and yanks the keys from the ignition before yanking just as hard at the door handle. He casts the words over his shoulder when he says, “I’ll tell you inside.”

Will climbs out of the car carefully. Their fingers twitch to touch their belly or even just press against their sternum to get air to return properly to their lungs. This land of paradise doesn’t feel like anywhere Will should be.

“Mr. Graham, I assume!” the woman calls out, still just big smiles. She looks at him and her teeth are so perfectly white and straight and perfectly framed by light pink lipstick. “You must be Will. You can call me Mrs. Anderson.”

“Should we go inside?” Dad asks, sounding even brusquer in contrast with Mrs. Anderson’s happy manners.

“Oh!” she says like she’s in on the joke. “Yes! Let’s go in. My husband is waiting for us.”

Will follows their dad and Mrs. Anderson inside even though Will can hardly feel their feet on the ground. The sun reflects brightly off the white paint on the steps and front porch, not a spot of dirt to be found. Will feels bad stepping on it when they know their boots probably still have some mud dried into the tread. They have the same feeling when they sit on the couch. The couch is the lightest gray it could be, as if politely conceding that more white wouldn’t be practical when having guests. Will’s dark jeans stand out, especially the threads that hang from the tears in them.

Mrs. Anderson leaves Will and their dad there just before she disappears into another room. Their dad looks just as out of place and uncomfortable as Will is. He doesn’t hide his frown, which Will would have guessed was rude and forbidden in such a house, but Mr. Anderson frowns too from his seat in a chair that looks *maybe* stylish, but *definitely not* comfortable. He’s dressed in a suit and a *nice* one at that. He has a classically handsome face in the way his wife is classically beautiful. He’d stood up to greet them and immediately sat down again when his wife whisked away.

“I made us some snacks,” Mrs. Anderson announces when she returns. She holds the handles on either end of a silver platter. She seems to have no problem balancing the little bowls and full glasses on top. She offers a drink first to her husband and then sets the tray on the table in front of Will. “Nice and healthy ones,” she says as she gives Will a sort of *look*.

“Thanks,” Will says, though they don’t reach for the bite-sized servings of various things on skewers. They just count the ways those little bites could drip and stain.

“Of course!” Mrs. Anderson says as she sits in the seat near her husband. She bats a hand towards Will and smiles in a teasing sort of way. “Your health isn’t just about you anymore, you know.”

“Dad—” Will says, turning towards him. They don’t know what to say next and won’t get the chance anyway.

“You know, Will,” Mrs. Anderson continues on without a care and acting as if *Will* had been the one to interrupt *her*. “Some people come by some things very easily and others have to work very hard. We’ve been blessed with a good home and good money. Archie is a finance manager, you know? Taking care of big accounts, lots of money to consider in that line of work.”

Will is left staring at their dad, who just nods his head at Mrs. Anderson and doesn’t give Will even a *blink* in their direction. His cough is loud as he clears his throat enough to say, “We know.”

“We can buy everything a child would need ten times over, but haven’t yet been blessed with one ourselves,” Mrs. Anderson says as she lays a hand over her heart. “The cost of that hardship is nothing to sneeze at. Meanwhile, you’ve made a baby and paid nothing at all.”

The thrumming in Will’s veins since Dad parked the truck kicks up until their pulse pounds so hard it shakes at their hands. Their eyes feel impossibly dry, blinking over and over, but still when they open again, their dad is still just *sitting there*. “Dad—”

“We know it would be a sacrifice with some cost to it,” Mr. Anderson says and Will might have forgotten what his voice sounded like since last time he used it. It’s a perfectly nice voice. It’s the seriousness and callousness in his tone that make his words *ugly*. “But we’re prepared to take care of that.”

“No.”

Mrs. Anderson *almost* flinches. She hides it well in the open and close of her curled eyelashes. She blinks those eyes at Will as if hearing them for the first time. “Excuse me?”

“No,” Will says again, their voice wobbling. They clench their jaw and curl their hand into a tight fist to steady the shaking. “You really do have more money than sense if you think you can just *buy* a *baby*.”

Their dad sits upright, the most action and attention he's shown all day. Though, he still looks between the Andersons instead of looking at Will and still just asks *her*, "Could you give me a minute?"

Mrs. Anderson slides her smile back into place and folds her hands in her lap. She nods her head and looks at her husband for confirmation before telling Will's dad, "We'll go make sure the paperwork is in order."

As soon as the Andersons have left the room, their dad turns to them with *fury* in his eyes. "You're the stupid one thinking this could go any other way," he accuses. He doesn't bother to lower his voice to a whisper and gives Will the understanding that while the information might be new to Will, they're the only one. "I don't have much, but you wouldn't get a cent of it and then you'd start seeing what makes *sense*."

Will shakes their head. "No."

"When your baby doesn't have food to eat or a place to stay?" Dad questions. "When your boyfriend abandons you and you're on your own?"

Will tries not to imagine what their dad suggests, but it's hard to resist when repetition and worry have already carved a path for those thoughts in Will's brain. The thoughts of going hungry with a crying baby and being ashamed of themself for inflicting such a thing on a child have swirled in their head while the only thing to offer any hope for comfort has been Duncan giving his promises.

"Don't talk about him," Will says. "You don't know anything about him."

"How do you think these *special arrangements* got made?" their dad demands. His scoff is cruel. "You thought we'd ever have a reason to cross paths with *the Andersons* without *his people*?"

Will shakes their head again even as they feel woozy. "No."

"You don't have a choice," their dad commands. He points an accusatory finger in Will's direction and then digs it into his knee as a warning. "Your choices went away when you got yourself knocked up. You're just signing at the bottom of the page now."

Will curls their arm around their belly and feels the baby growing within – *their* baby, Will's and Duncan's, and *no one else's*. They think of the day by the river when summer sunlight shone down on them together as they considered what hope might feel like if it were allowed to only feel good. They'd promised not to let anyone make them ashamed. They have to keep their promises if they expect Duncan to.

Tears dot their eyelashes as they shake their head this time. "You can't make me."

"You bet your ass I can."

Will pushes themself off the stiff couch and it's almost easily done. They teeter slightly and

knock against the table, causing a little of the green juice in a glass to spill over the edge. It makes Will want to pour it over everything in the room that could stain.

Their dad grabs their forearm with the same strength he'd used to dig a divot in his knee. "What do you think you're doing?"

Will looks their dad dead in the eye. "Let go of me or the Andersons will have to explain to their happy, little neighbors why they heard *screaming*."

Their dad releases their arm and then clenches his hand in a fist. "Don't you dare show your face again," he commands. "Remember this is the best option you'll be given. Anything that comes after it won't be so nice."

They turn with the next shake of their head. Will's heart thuds with each step as they walk out the front door. The pulses of adrenaline keep them walking past the curious looks that follow them down the sidewalk. They walk and walk and still can't seem to make it past a land of whites, grays, and pastels. Their black sweatshirt feels stuffy in the heat but at least the sleeves absorb a lot of tears. Those tears last longer than the adrenaline does. Turns out righteous rage is nothing in comparison to defeat.

Will doesn't know how far they've walked, but they have a strong suspicion that they'll have a blister or two. When their walking might seem more like limping, they're grateful to have a door to push open. They shuffle the rest of the way to a booth way in the back of a coffee shop and fall more heavily than they would like against the poorly-cushioned seat. They grab napkins from the dispenser one after another. The thin flimsy material is soaked in no time and Will has to use so many that the underside of their nose must be rubbed pink.

Will looks up when one of the coffee shop employees wearing a plain brown apron with a coffee cup logo on the front walks up to their table. When the employee eyes the mound of napkins that's growing on the table, Will awkwardly scoops them together to hide them away in their closed fist.

"You're supposed to buy something if you want to sit," the employee instructs as they drop a clean, dry cloth onto the table.

"Sorry," Will says, voice thick with even more tears somehow. They try not to sniff too loudly to avoid further embarrassment, but they can feel an errant tear about to fall from their chin. "Could I just use your phone? Then I'll get out of your hair?"

Will can see the pity in the employee's eyes as they say, "Sure."

The employee goes behind the counter and hands the phone over without another word. Will quickly dials the number they luckily know by memory. The phone rings a couple of times and Will fears Duncan might not answer. Their face twists to try to keep the tears at bay even though they're struck with the bone-deep fear that if Duncan doesn't answer, Will might *really* be on their own.

"Hello?" rasps Duncan's voice on the other end of the line.

“*Duncan*,” they gasp in relief.

“Will?”

They sniffle and rub their nose on one of the napkins still held in their hand. “I need you to come get me.”

“Where are you?” Duncan asks and Will can practically hear how he frowns.

“I-I don’t know. Some coffee shop,” Will says. They uncrumple one of the napkins to read off what’s printed there: “Hot Java.”

“What’s going on?”

Will thinks of their dad in a suburban home with a *finance manager* and his wife who think that people – *an innocent baby, no less* – can be turned into a lump sum. Will thinks about how they themself might not be able to afford the cheapest item on the menu. They didn’t bring any of the spare cash they’d managed to scrape together. They didn’t pack their clothes. They don’t have *anything*.

They think of all this and the only answer they can give Duncan is a choked sob into the phone.

“Is the baby okay?” Duncan asks next and Will’s heart clenches at how concern softens his voice.

“Yeah,” Will assures him and props the phone between their ear and their shoulder so they can drop their hand to touch the swell of their belly and feel how it’s still there. Relief is what comes when they remember what they *haven’t lost*. They manage to smile slightly as they tell him, “The baby’s okay.”

“Okay,” Duncan says with a heavy exhale, then there’s rustling and the jingling of keys in the background. “I’ll come get you. Stay there.”

“Okay,” Will agrees with a sigh, exhausted yet again by a downswing in their emotions and exhausted further by the knowledge that it won’t last. “I’ll be here.”

When Will gives back the phone, the employee gives them a glass of water and a scone on a plate and, without a word, shoos Will back towards the same booth as before. They drink the water to make up for even a fraction of the tears they’ve shed. The scone is a little too dry and that doesn’t help, but Will would never, ever think to complain.

The delicate chime that sounds when Duncan charges through the door doesn’t match how askew his hair is and the frenzy in how his eyes scan the room. As soon as Duncan sees Will, it seems to take only a blink of an eye for him to cross the room. He crouches at Will’s side and brushes a thumb across their cheek.

“Hey,” he whispers softly.

“Hey,” they whisper in return. Their lips curve towards a smile as they look at their boyfriend with his cheekbones and stubble and messy hair that disappears at the nape underneath his leather jacket. Their smile falters halfway there and falls as they start to cry all over again and loop their arms around his shoulders.

Duncan lets them cling too tight and only rests his hands on the dip of their back and their knee. “Let’s get you home.”

Will’s tears drip down his neck as they gasp out the words: *“I can’t go home.”*

His hands tighten their grip, but it’s not painful or demanding. His grip only smothers the panic from their nerves. “Let’s go to the truck,” Duncan murmurs.

Duncan’s stubble catches on Will’s hair as they nod. He doesn’t move to stand until Will has released him from their grip. He offers Will a helping hand and they couldn’t be more grateful to take him up on the offer. Duncan’s brow furrows when Will’s ankles sting and have them limping slightly. But Duncan knows when to save his words and he’s kind enough to keep them in until they’re closed away in his car.

There’s a shine to Duncan’s eyes when he looks at them. He’s careful as he rests his open hand palm-up on the center console. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Will takes that offered palm *happily*. “Please don’t be. I don’t want to be sorry about anything,” Will says feeling a couple more traitorous tears fall. They squeeze Duncan’s hand tight and sure. “I just need us to be somewhere we know no one else will be.”

Duncan’s lips twitch towards a smile and he nods. “Okay.”

He doesn’t let go of Will’s hand. He uses his other arm to reach into his jacket pocket and even twists himself oddly to get the key in the ignition and turn it. He goes out of his way to set them in motion and soon enough they’re out on the open road. Will leans their head on his shoulder and the sunset has the sky painted in vibrant oranges, pinks, and purples as Will allows their eyes to close…

Chapter End Notes

This is might be one of my favorite chapters I've ever done...

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The clouds have turned dark purple and the last sun of the day casts an orange glow in a soft and vibrant outline along the edges. Will can see it beyond the neon sign with a flickering Y. Will rubs their knuckles against their eyes and when their hands fall away, the rest of the word *VACANCY* looks less and less blurry with each blink. They roll their shoulders against an ache and there's another ache in their neck as they shift in their seat. The door pulling away startles them until they see that Duncan's the one on the other side.

"Sorry," Duncan says as he ducks his head. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"It's okay," Will says, though their voice falters.

Duncan ducks further to lean in and reach across Will. Their seat belt buckle unclicks easily and simply when Duncan presses the button. As the seatbelt retracts, Duncan's hand follows it and drags a bit across Will's belly as he goes. Will catches his hand and holds it against where their baby kicks. Will sighs as little feet or fists knock strong and steady inside Will's belly and against Duncan's palm.

When Duncan moves his hand away, Will wants to snatch it back again. But they don't. They only let their eyes linger, trailing along with Duncan's hand past their hip, down their thigh, and under the turn of their knee.

"Duncan," Will interrupts when his arm reaches underneath both knees and his fingers turn and curl. "I can walk."

But Duncan carries on. His arms tense and his muscles bunch as he braces himself to lift them up. "Your ankles hurt," Duncan rasps as his other hand curls around the side of Will's ribcage too and he lifts Will from the truck without so much as groaning.

The only help Will is allowed to offer is an arm curled around Duncan's shoulder and leaning against his chest to help him keep balance. Duncan closes the car door on his own with the nudge of his shoulder. Luckily, the door he stops at is on the first floor so there's no need for him to conquer stairs as well.

"Are you going to manage to unlock the door too?" Will teases when Duncan doesn't immediately put them down.

They can hear how Duncan's hum is short with reluctance, but he does concede and lower Will to the ground. Their ankles sting a little as they shift on their feet and Duncan is efficient in retrieving the key from his pocket and sliding it into the lock. He pushes the door open and flicks the light on in a quick, efficient motion.

The room is basic – as you might expect from a motel that will accept seventeen-year-olds as customers. Granted, Duncan might be mistaken for eighteen with some plausible deniability. He's not a smooth-talker but he also doesn't give anyone any reason to question. The week's worth of stubble makes him look rougher around the edges. And anyway, why shouldn't they be trusted with something as basic as a bed and a bathroom?

Will does their best not to wince as they step towards the bed and lower themself onto it. The mattress sags as they sit and their boots clunk heavily on the floor. They drag their fingers through their hair to brush the curls back from where they'd fallen in front of their eyes. When they brush their nose on the back of their hand, they're reminded that it's still pink and raw. Tears burn in their eyes once more and they might feel a burning in the blood that heats their belly too. Their heart sinks deeper and deeper into the cavern of their chest and they nearly collapse on themself with *another fucking sob*.

They grip their hand in a fist although there are no longer any napkins to hold onto or tear apart. There shouldn't be any tears left that haven't been soaked into one of those flimsy napkins or into their sleeve. They feel all dried up and worn out, but it hardly seems to matter. Will can only rub at the side of their belly and watch as Duncan unties their boots enough to slip them off their feet.

"You're okay," Duncan says when he looks up at them.

Even if Will could talk through the tears, they can't say they fully believe him. Maybe that's what makes it so difficult to keep the tears at bay. The dam that might stopper them can't be realized. Will doesn't know if they've truly and clearly been able to see the way forward since their feet carried them away from the Andersons' house. They're just going through the motions and, as the world keeps on spinning and *spinning*, Will's not sure how to keep up.

Will ducks their head as it spins and presses their hands against their eyes to keep out anything other than the black abyss behind their eyelids. Their shoulders fall and Duncan sits next to them on the bed. He wraps his arm around their back almost like he did when he was carrying them; the way they lean their head against his shoulder is almost the same too.

Duncan presses his face to Will's hair and murmurs, "You're okay."

Will pulls away so that their nod won't knock against his nose. When they open their eyes again, they see Duncan – *and Duncan only.* He doesn't match the dull, faded, yellow paint on the walls or the yellow-tinted lighting coming from the single, bare bulb overhead. Cooler tones have always seemed to suit him best – calm, cool, and collected in his own way. There's a *relief* Will feels whenever Duncan lends them his quiet. It's the chill in the air around solid ice and the warmth of a hat and scarf.

Will sighs and kisses Duncan just once to drink down the calm from the source. When they pull away from just that one, singular kiss, they sigh again and can honestly say, "I am now."

Duncan shifts closer, tightening his arm around Will and pressing a stubbly kiss to their cheekbone. "You'll always be okay."

Will turns to gently knock their foreheads against each other. “Promise me again.”

“I promise.”

Will wrinkles their brow just a little longer. “Okay,” they say as their next smile smooths a little more of the tension away. “Then talk can be saved for later.”

Duncan doesn’t need to be told twice – barely need to be told *once* – and his lips and hands put Will at ease as he meets them for another kiss. He settles his hands so gently and so surely. When his fingers bunch in the sweatshirt Will wears, it is a question, but not a hesitant one. Duncan can be fairly confident of the answer even before Will gives a quiet moan.

The permission is given easily, but habit still has Will nearly flinching. The air in the room is slightly cooler with autumn, but Will’s goosebumps might have just as easily come from fear. For months, open air has held the sort of suspense that builds just before a jump scare. When fabric falling to the floor and clinking of Will’s belt buckle are the only sounds to be heard – and sounds muffled and muted by the carpet at that – Will tries to remember the click and clank of both a bolt and a chain locking the door.

Duncan leans back against the bed with Will. Now that clothes have been cast aside, there’s more for Duncan’s eyes to pour over than there has ever been before. Will might not have even have felt able to treat themself to the chance just to look and take it all in. Duncan’s fingers and eyes are equally gentle with care and curiosity as they drag across Will’s bare, exposed skin. More goosebumps rise in the wake. These ones are most *definitely* good.

Duncan’s fingers spread wide as he cradles the curve. At one point, Will’s belly fit within his palm, at another point he could still hold it in the space between the tip of his middle finger and the heel of his hand. The swell is now far beyond that.

“The baby’s bigger,” Duncan observes before pressing a kiss to Will’s neck and stroking once more along the rise with Will’s belly button at the peak and down the sloping curve at the other side.

Will hums and exposes more of their neck to the press of Duncan’s lips and the scratch of his stubble. “Probably,” they say. It would be more teasing if not for how their breath hitches and sighs. “Babies tend to do that.”

“I missed you.”

The clench of Will’s heart is so sudden and so stark that they might flinch with it. Their sharp inhale comes out shakier and they gasp with another touch of Duncan’s lips to their throat. “I missed you too,” Will says with a sigh and they don’t think it’s possible anything could be more true.

Duncan gives another broad, wide stroke across Will’s belly. “I missed both of you.”

Will’s chest pangs again – this time with the thought that by hiding away they forced Duncan to miss out on more than they’d realized. Will and Duncan can hold the same pain in missing

each other, but Will hasn't been forced to miss their baby for a moment.

Will's hand is less gentle as they press it over Duncan's, but what might seem the kindest thing to do in this moment is to make up for the lost time and absence. "We're together now," they assure him.

Duncan's hum makes them shiver. He shifts his legs and aligns his body further along Will's side. "We will be together for a long time," he promises.

"Prove it to me," Will whispers into the open air.

Duncan urges Will over to their side and they easily comply with the encouragements of his touch. Duncan lays himself along Will's back, guides Will's knee up a bit further to press against the lowest curve of their belly, and drags his fingers back down Will's thigh to stroke between their legs.

"More," Will says when just stroking isn't enough. They can feel the shape of Duncan's cock against their ass and the two of them have had to be satisfied with only the barest touches of fingers for *so long* - on the couch under the bleachers, in abandoned classrooms, by the stream. "Duncan, *more.*"

Duncan makes sure nothing is painful – not now. They've done rough and bruised and grabbing hands and Will's nails dragging raised pink lines in Duncan's back and they'll do it that way again someday. But now as Duncan anchors himself with a hand at Will's hip, his thrusts don't jostle Will too much and, whether he's rough or gentle, Will moans and whimpers in almost the same way.

Will might feel themself relax for the first time in a long time – too long for them to remember when their head is woozy with pleasure. They let Duncan rock against their body and bring them pleasure in pushes and pulls. Will and Duncan's bodies know each other as their minds do. Will shivers and whimpers in only the best ways. Duncan's grunts brush warm air against their neck whenever his stubble isn't prickling at it or his lips pressing affection against the sensitive skin.

When tears next come, they're tears of aching pleasure that grips at their core. Every shift of their fingers is felt that much more as they lift Duncan's hand from their hip and place it back on their belly. Duncan's hips falter and stutter in their pace as he feels along the curve and Will feels how well it all fits together – like there's no other way it could be.

Will cries out when pleasure overtakes them. They don't have to muffle the sound or hide themself away. Duncan doesn't have to give a second thought as he spills and Will is filled more than they ever have been – filled with pleasure, affection, potential, and *new life*. When they cry out, it's not from sadness but from having Duncan there and *for once* feeling complete – not hidden away or chipped off at the shoulder, whittled or invisible. Their breaths heave and pant as they both settle back into new skin that fits differently – or at least does to Will.

When Will and Duncan inevitably have to separate and move away, they do so reluctantly.

Duncan takes his turn in the bathroom after Will does and when he comes back to bed, Will is already turned on their side and facing away towards the door. The mattress dips with the press of Duncan's knee and Will might hear the springs squeak. Duncan sets his hand on Will's shoulder and they grab for his fingers.

Will forces the words that have been stuck in their throat to spill from their lips: "They wanted to sell the baby."

Duncan's body weight shifts smooth and quick. Will hadn't left him much room but he fits easily in the space that remains between Will and the edge of the bed. He's already frowning when his head hits the barest edge of a pillow. There's a flash of worry in his eye like the shining wet of tears and then he blinks and it's concealed behind upset or anger.

"Will," he rasps as he looks at them more head-on and straightforward than ever before.

Will closes their eyes. Otherwise, they won't be able to say it. To look into Duncan's eyes as they tell him would be to see themself reflected back. They would become so acutely aware of themself and so acutely aware of how there's nowhere to hide from the *feeling*.

"My dad. Vivian," they state – as good of a place to start as any. "They set it all up. A nice, *suburban* family. The baby would have a house with a front yard."

If they won't face their feelings with their eyes open, then Will is forced instead to see the pretty houses and the perfect yards and the nice clothes and good food behind their closed eyes. There would be cookies to sneak from the jar in the cupboard and a constant cycle of pristine toys.

But then there's the thought of Mr. Anderson who would only see a child for its failure to act like a grown adult should – *too needy, too whiney, too curious*. Mrs. Anderson might believe that children should be seen and not heard. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson could stomach the idea of buying *a baby* because they're the kind of people who prefer baby's as a concept instead of a *person*.

"My dad wanted me to think you knew about it," Will says. Though they still won't open their eyes, they'll hold his hand. "But I knew you didn't."

Duncan grips back and his voice is rough as he confirms, "I didn't."

"I can't go home. And I can't go to your house either," Will says with a sigh, feeling how the tension creeps back in – the worry, the responsibility, the fear of the future. "And there's nowhere else to go."

"We can go wherever we want," Duncan says like he's said all his promises before.

Will furrows their brow like they have before too and once again asks the question that's been nagging at them all along: *"How?"*

"Vivian can find people who put a price on a life," Duncan states. "Because that's what I am

to them."

Will's eyes blink open. When they look at Duncan, they see how *his* brow is furrowed and how *he* frowns. And so they close their eyes again so that he might not have to feel it any more than he will already have to. Will bumps their forehead against Duncan's and the tip of their nose against his, just so he will know Will is still there and still *feels* him even if they don't *see* him.

"My parents worked for Damocles. Hard work but they say that the money makes it count," Duncan continues, saying it as deep and simple as he says most other things. "Then they died and left their money to me. Vivian gives me stipends because I'm not eighteen."

Of course, Will has noticed that Duncan has Vivian where he should have parents. Of course, it always seemed *interesting* that Duncan could live in that house mostly alone and never mention anything about a job or the bills. He's promised time and time again that it would all work out and Will never knew how. They never would have guessed *this*.

"I'll be a millionaire on my birthday," Duncan states. "Until then, that door is locked and bolted. And we can go somewhere else to wait and start over."

Will scoots in as close as they can be. Their belly presses against Duncan's and the baby within kicks against both of them. Will breathes in the smell of smoke that always clings to Duncan. They cling to him too as the breath of air fills their lungs, into their veins, and into the blood that keeps their heart beating.

"We can start tomorrow."

Chapter End Notes

I'm changing how I post on this AO3 account. If you want to learn more, click here.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The desk is kind of a cluttered mess and so is the rest of the office for that matter. There are papers in stacks, in folders, in boxes. The accountant behind the mess shuffles a few more papers in his hands. These ones are new. The ink is still fresh from when the forms were filled out in the lobby. The man who holds them has grey hairs lain across his forehead and big glasses that accentuate the enthusiastic openness of his eyes. The nameplate on the desk says his name is Mr. Lomas.

Mr. Lomas licks his thumb to flip through the papers again until he settles back on the first one. “Your name is Duncan Vizla, yes?”

“Yes,” Duncan states. His shoulders have a weary downturn and his eyes show his exhaustion in the lowness of his eyelids and the darkness underneath. He leans forward and hands the accountant his driver’s license and the chair creaks with a tiredness Duncan doesn’t give voice to.

Mr. Lomas looks between the paperwork and Duncan and back again and then makes a checkmark with his pen. “You’re wanting to access your trust, yes?”

“Yes.”

“It’s his money,” Will insists for him. Duncan’s never been the chatty type and that hasn’t changed. If anything, his tiredness makes it worse. His voice sometimes seems so rough and rasping that uttering more than one word might be too much. “Or it will be on his birthday. We just need to make sure no one tries to declare him dead before then.”

The accountant adjusts his glasses on his nose and looks at Will closely. His eyes trail from Will’s face to where everyone seems to look these days. “And you are?”

“Having his baby, yes,” Will states as they place a hand on the curve of their belly. It’s rounder every morning when they wake up. They’ve asked Duncan if he notices a growth spurt during the night, but with barely a few blinks of sleep, he doesn’t seem able to differentiate what yesterday was like versus today. “You can see why we need the money.”

“Yes,” Mr. Lomas agrees as he continues to gawk like so many have done in the small towns they’ve traveled through. “I can see that.”

Will bites their lip and suppresses a frown. They can’t let hesitance show or give any more reason for doubt and suspicion than what’s already usually assigned to teenage parents. “We can’t pay you right now but so long as you get him his money, you’ll have yours too.”

“I can contact Damocles,” the accountant suggests. He picks up his pen again and wrinkles

his brow. “I assume you’ll need to open a bank account as well.”

“Yes,” Duncan confirms.

Mr. Lomas clicks his pen and circles and scribbles on one page. “Your birthday is in…” the accountant starts, trailing off as he does the math.

“Six months,” Duncan states, efficient as always.

“Six months,” Mr. Lomas agrees with another scribble of his pen. “So, in six months, you’ll be able to draw half of your trust fund. How about that, Mr. Vizla?”

Duncan only blinks silently. Will’s not even sure how he’s keeping his eyes open. They hold his hand where it sits on the armrest and his fingers have enough energy left to curl around theirs. They smile slightly and say for him, “Sounds great.”

Those arrangements were what was on the agenda for today. They’d driven far enough away from what used to be their homes and stopped for the night as soon as they felt safe to do so. Duncan withdrew as much as he could with his debit card before he lost access to that – no doubt Vivian’s doing. They have all their money in a specific pocket in the side bag Duncan bought for Will. Now their days comprise mostly of checking out of last night’s motel room, driving, eating at diners, and finding another motel that will take their money and turn a blind eye to their ages. It hasn’t been too hard to find places. Will is not sure what that says about the state of things.

Their current motel room is essentially the same as all the others – a bathroom with the basics, one bed for Will to sleep in, one chair by the door for Duncan to sit in. Will rolls their shoulders and tilts their head to stretch their neck with sympathy for how uncomfortable those chairs have looked. Still, Duncan never complains. He makes sure the doors are locked and moves the chair in front of it like the habit it has become.

Before he can slump into his seat, Will takes him by the hand and pulls him towards the bed. Fatigue may make his movements sluggish and might make him want to drag his feet, but Duncan doesn’t put up a fight or dig his heels in. He sits down on the edge of the bed and spreads his knees wide enough for Will to stand between them.

Will cradles his jaw in their palms and brushes their fingers over the cheekbones that seem to only get sharper and sharper. Duncan tilts his head up and what light comes from two dim, dusty lamps deepens the shadows on his face. Even so tired, Duncan looks so *handsome*.

“You should sleep,” Will tells him, not a scolding or criticism. They smile down at him and drag their thumb against the prickle of stubble that’s grown longer than maybe ever before.

“I’m fine,” Duncan rasps, but he lets his eyes slide closed. “It is what it is.”

Will pulls him closer to rest his cheek against the thin, black fabric that covers Will’s belly. They thread their fingers through his hair as the baby kicks at Duncan’s cheek. Duncan reaches his arms up and uses the strength that never seems to fully exhaust itself to wrap his

arms under Will's belly and around to their back.

Duncan's breaths get softer as the baby's kicks start to settle, both father and child tucking in for a nap. Will continues to stoke their fingers through the hair at the nape of Duncan's neck and relishes the shivers that show how Duncan still allows himself to feel pleasure and be soothed. Each shake might start to unwind muscles that are far too wound up.

Will puts their hands on his shoulders and grip as they raise one knee and then the other to sit on his lap. Duncan's arms are reluctant to loosen but he wraps them back around Will as soon as he's able. Will settles into his lap and pushed against his shoulders until he concedes and lies back against the lumpy comforter on the squeaky mattress.

"Soon enough, you won't be able to stay upright," Will observes. "That's hardly going to help."

Duncan hums. "It's better than nothing," he states as his hands move to where they so often are and he touches at the round swell of Will's belly.

Duncan's affection seems to grow just as fast – *if not faster* – than the curve does, especially now that there's no reason for Duncan and Will to pretend they are any less proud than they truly are. Sure, there could be stares at stores and judgmental strangers, but that doesn't stop them – *couldn't stop them* – from holding hands whenever they want and Will wearing whatever clothes they want and Duncan's hands can wander and adore more.

Never once since running away has Will regretted it. Never once has Duncan proved to be the man Will's dad thought he was. Never once did Will think he would be.

"I love you," Will says as they touch their hand against the center of Duncan's sternum. His ribcage protects his heart and Will's along with it. "You know that, right?"

Duncan hums, but his unease seems to be about more than just fatigue.

"You didn't know," Will realizes with a sigh. They brush Duncan's bangs back and away from his forehead and bend over and around their belly to kiss right on his furrowed brow. "Well, now you know. Don't you ever forget."

Duncan's broad hand grabs in the fabric of Will's dress and he vows, "I won't."

It takes a little bit of contorting and the crappy mattresses haven't done Will's back any favors. There's a faint ache and a momentary twinge, but it's worth it to press a kiss to Duncan's lips. The words *I love you* echo in Will's skull as they feel just how unbelievably true that is. The ache in their chest has them kissing harder, but they know that no press of their lips can possibly be ardent enough to fully convey just how much they love him. They will have to show him over and over – not only do they have to, they *want* to.

"I love you too," Duncan says, rougher with breathlessness and maybe an ache of his own in his chest.

“I know,” Will says and they pant as they try to catch their breath. It feels wet and thick in their throat and chokes at the words as they say, “It means the world to me.”

When their back protests too much, Will leans back and up. When they shift to move off of Duncan’s lap, it’s a little less graceful than they would like. At first, Duncan’s grip pulls against the fabric of Will's dress with his reluctance to let go. Then he remembers himself and unclenches his fingers, but Will doesn’t go far.

“We’ll find somewhere to settle,” they say as they sit next to Duncan’s hip. “Maybe the next town. Or the town after that.”

They reach their hand out to touch Duncan’s belt and they can see how his belly flexes in instinctive anticipation as they pull the strip of leather back just enough to undo the buckle. Their fingers and thumb undo Duncan’s button and zip next and they can feel the intensity of his eyes on them even as Duncan struggles to blink.

“For now, I want you to sit back and relax,” Will says. They slip their fingers underneath the waistband of Duncan’s boxers and let their fingernails drag ever so slightly against the hairs that curl at the base of Duncan’s cock. “Let me take care of you for once.”

Duncan’s lips twitch towards a smile – probably the best he can do as tired as he is. He lifts his hips to help Will pull his pants down far enough to expose his cock to open air. Will touches and strokes and admires until they have to focus on one more shift of their own hips. They yank up their dress and plant their knees on either side of Duncan’s head. The fabric bunches under their arms and leaves their belly bare and hanging. The touch of Duncan’s lips against the tight skin proves that their belly hangs low enough and close enough to kiss.

As Duncan kisses and licks to his heart’s content, Will does the same. Will’s pleasure is a pleasant hum that doesn’t need any more attention. It’s nice to feel just on its own. Will is more than happy to focus on Duncan for a while. What brings him pleasure, brings Will pleasure. When he drags a lick across a belly button that’s just recently turned out, Will moans around his cock and makes Duncan moan too.

Will’s breath is panting and pressing his belly harsher against Duncan’s face by the time Duncan’s pleasure sees its peak. Their heart is still racing in their chest by the time Duncan is dozing and Will is just happy to have him sleeping in bed with them. There’s a pleasure and satisfaction to be found in the safekeeping of Duncan’s arms and offering their own comfort to him in return.

“I love you,” Will whispers one more time as they kiss one closed eyelid.

Duncan might twitch, but he doesn’t wake and this may not be the dream most people might have, but Will isn’t most people.

Chapter End Notes

There's two more chapters posted here.

Chapter 8

The soles of Will's shoes squeak against the tiles on the floor even though they'd knocked off most of the snow and slush before they made it past the entrance. Their eyes scan the shelves as they walk by. They're not sure what to look for, but they're sure they'll know it when they see it. They feel their hunger in the back of their throat even though it hasn't really been all that long since they last ate. Unfortunately, they'd walked past the diner just as the smell of coffee and syrup came wafting out behind a happy customer.

Will rubs across their belly as the baby kicks and they quietly tsk their tongue at the baby's impatience. Their eyes continue to wander until either their stomach or their baby helps to decide what they're craving – and what they can make. When they flick their eyes upwards, Will sees Duncan inspecting two slightly different boxes of mac and cheese. He sets down both of them and walks away. They wouldn't be able to cook it.

It's still before lunch, so Will and Duncan haven't worried themselves with finding another motel yet, but they rarely have a stove and a microwave can be a stroke of luck. But even cheap diner food adds up. The money in Will's bag went from a few large bills to a handful of bills of different amounts. After the last stop at the gas station, it became barely more than a thick stack of fives and ones, plus some change.

Will adds peanut butter to the basket on their arm. It's when their eyes land on the trail mix that they realize what they were looking for. They grab one bag and their hand hesitates by a second one as they look towards Duncan again. He would tell them to get it, but Will's more used to being poor than Duncan is. Will chooses just the one and moves towards the counter. Duncan meets them there, holding as much as he can fit in his two big hands. As Will starts to set the items in their basket onto the counter one-by-one, Duncan sets down both handfuls.

The woman behind the counter starts to ring everything up and when Will isn't looking between the cart and the counter, they're glancing towards the total on the register. Will also knows without having to look that the woman is staring back at them.

She has long dirty blonde hair and bangs cut in a round shape to frame her face. When she smiles, it brings a further round softness at her cheekbones – even as her eyes stay keen. "You kids aren't from around here," she observes as she adds the peanut butter to the running total.

"No," Duncan states. "We're just driving through."

They've been asked that a lot as they've stopped in small towns. They've followed the winding highways, made turns as they saw fit, and then stopped when they needed to. Will and Duncan like to keep their distance, avoiding the hustle, bustle, and crowds in big cities. Unfortunately, this also means visiting places where they're readily identified as sore thumbs.

"You heading home?" she asks – only for the benefit of her curiosity or small talk, neither of which are anything Will and Duncan would usually care for.

“No,” Duncan states again.

“You shouldn’t be out here by yourselves,” she scolds in a knowing sort of way.

Will grimaces and shifts their feet as they pull the last item from their basket and set it on the counter. “We’re fine.”

She continues on bagging what she’s rung up and asking questions: “Where are your parents?”

Will sighs. They might feel a headache building. Maybe they should ask for some Advil but their head hurts a little too much for them to remember if they’re supposed to take Advil or not. They rub their brow and the pain makes them snappish as they say, “His parents are dead and mine might as well be.”

“Surely it can’t be so bad,” the woman scolds some more as she frowns at them and tilts her chin like she’s speaking to *children*. “I know parents can seem unreasonable, but you’ll see soon enough that we always have our reasons.”

“Can’t we just pay?” Will grumbles. With every minute they’re hungrier and more *annoyed*.

“Are they upset that you’re having a baby?” she asks with the taunting arch of one of her brows.

“Upset is an understatement,” Will grumbles as they rub their hand along their belly out of instinct and habit, as well as affection, of course – *always*. Will has felt awe and affection and *love* for the baby that only gets more and more precious and *real*. What their dad feels could not be more opposite.

“You should head home,” the woman says anyway. “They’ve probably calmed down by now.”

Will doesn’t move a muscle but Duncan moves closer and sets a hand against their lower back. They then turn their head towards him but only a little. They breathe in a heavy, angry breath and hold it despite the pound of their heart in their chest in a way that says *fight*. They keep their voice as even as they can as they state, “You don’t know *shit*.”

The woman’s finger hovers over one of the keys on her register as she pauses. She turns to look firmly at Will and crosses her hands together on the counter. “Well, tell me then.”

“Will,” Duncan starts, but Will just hands off the empty basket to him and he walks the few steps to put it with the rest stacked by the door.

“You want me to go back *home* to my dad so he can make a *pretty penny* off my baby?” Will says as they try to not be too rough on the clasp of their bag or the zipper. They grit their teeth and dig their hand into the pocket where there are pennies, quarters, and a handful of bills. “You think he’s *calmed down*? You think *we* have?”

“You can’t stay on the road,” the woman insists, though her tone isn’t quite so much like a *know-it-all* now. If they weren’t so pissed off, they might smirk.

“We’ll figure it out,” they counter. “Like we’ve *been* figuring things out.”

“How much longer do you have?” she asks, this time raising *both* brows with her presumption and skepticism. “Three or four months?”

“It’s none of your business,” they state as they count out some bills and slam them rather roughly on the counter.

“It could be my business,” she suggests as she frowns in a contemplative sort of way. “Or my husband’s. We do deliveries. This time of year we’re delivering *a lot* of logs. He could use someone to help chop the wood and do some of the transport. Might have him home in time for dinner.”

She looks over at Duncan and, as Will looks too, Duncan might seem like a deer caught in headlights – maybe a buck. He’s still composed – he’s still *Duncan*– but Will knows him well enough to see when he’s startled. It doesn’t happen much, but when it does, it’s memorable; that’s for sure.

Will and Duncan have continued to discuss settling and what they’ll do when they have. They know they’ll need jobs and that jobs will be yet another thing that depends on who is willing to hire teenagers and not just do it to bleed them of any youthful vigor until they’ve been bled dry and withered. Ultimately, Duncan will take whatever job he can and not complain, Will knows. He will let himself be exhausted as he already has proved he will do. Maybe chopping trees wouldn’t be the *worst* option…

“Hell, *I’d* like to make it home in time to *make* dinner,” the woman continues. “Maybe I could use some help too.”

Will hesitates with that and hesitates a little more because they *want*. Whatever shred of youthful vigor Will still has becomes excitement and maybe…*hope?* Though they’ve been the one to keep the money in their possession and though they’ve handed it to Duncan with every purchase, Will know it’s not *theirs*. They are giving because Duncan gave to them, not because they have anything of their own to offer or claim. Duncan wouldn’t hold it against them, but that doesn’t mean Will feels the same way…

“Now, we might not be able to pay you much,” she says, more a concession than a warning. “But my in-laws just moved to Florida – *thank god* – and the house hasn’t done well on the market. We’re not exactly a popular place to move. We might have to rent it for cheap if we want to make *any* sort of money and not just have it sitting around.”

Will shakes their head and the curls of hair that have grown long turn and shift with the movement and brush against their cheek. “I don’t believe you.”

“Where are my manners? Of course, you wouldn’t trust a no-name nobody,” she says with a laugh. She reaches her hand over the counter and holds it out for Will to shake. “I’m Molly. And you?”

“Will,” they say as they shake her hand. Then she turns and shakes Duncan’s hand too as Will introduces, “And Duncan.”

“Nice to meet you,” Molly greets with a smile. She pulls her hand back to take hold of the handles to the bags that contain everything Will and Duncan intended to come here for and a little more. She holds them out to Duncan he takes them quickly. “Now that we’re better acquainted, why don’t I take you to see the place? At least to see if you like it.”

Will looks at Duncan but he just looks back. He doesn’t have to say it for Will to know it’s up to them.

Molly flips the sign on the door to *Closed* on the way out. Will can still hear the jingle of the bell in their ear as her keys jangle. Duncan holds all the bags with one hand; his other holds Will’s. Will presses against Duncan’s body as the wind picks up and makes the cold air bite harder, a source of warmth and a shield.

The diner seems to have hit the lunchtime rush. People come and go and cross the street. Will’s eyes follow behind a family with parents that smile and a child asleep with their cheek pressed against their father’s shoulder. They stop at a kiosk tucked in an alley and the child tucks their face further into the comfort of their father’s neck when the wind picks up again.

“Oh, I’ve been getting this TV series from that box,” Molly remarks as if they’d asked. “It’s British, but you can put the subtitles on. I would recommend it, but there are other options too.”

“Um, okay,” Will replies. They look up at Duncan and ask, “Do you want to pick something?”

Duncan hums and just answers, “Sure.”

Will reaches into their bag again and pulls out a singular dollar bill to hand over.

“Oh, that one is all wrinkled and that machine can be so finicky,” Molly bemoans. She tucks the keys into the pocket of her coat and pulls out her wallet. She flips it open to fish out a dollar with barely a single crease and hands it to Duncan. “Here take this one.”

“Thanks,” Duncan says, though he takes what he’s offered with an uncertain frown.

Duncan walks away and stands politely far enough from the little family as they finish making their choice. Next to the kiosk and the little family is *Trudy’s Beauty Salon* – which is a particularly ugly yellow color – and then beyond that is the *Triple Oak Pet Emporium*. In the windows are cages for birds, tanks for lizards, and toys for dogs and cats.

“You should get some food too,” Molly interrupts. When Will with their mind still half-distracted by the pet shop, Molly explains, “It’s a long drive out there and I doubt you’ll be wanting to drive all the way back.”

Will supposes that does make *enough* sense. They are *still* hungry and only feel hungrier when they think of the nice, warm food to be had. The bustle inside the diner makes Will feel too big and too much in the way. They wrap their arm around their belly as if that might make it any smaller or feel any easier to get around. They manage to make their way up to

the waitress behind the counter while she's still shouting the last order to the guy in the kitchen.

Her eyes are already back on her notepad and her pen is at the ready as she asks, "What can I get for you?"

Duncan has been tending towards plainer things. He had oatmeal for breakfast. And *oatmeal* has always seemed like a particularly sad food as far as Will's concerned. So, instead they order mac and cheese and smile as they remember Duncan inspecting the boxed options. They also get meatloaf and might blame the baby for that depending on how it goes.

"Any winter coffee?" the waitress asks and then for the first time, actually looks up at Will. Her eyes trail down to their belly and she says, "Or not."

"No," Will says and for some reason can't help but laugh as they rub at where little feet kick. "Thank you."

It does pain Will a little to keep handing over money – over and over, three times in a row. It feels strange to go back outside and find that they both have so much to carry and hold onto. Duncan shoves the DVD case in the pocket of his coat and holds out his arm to offer his hand again. Will takes it as soon as they're close enough.

"All set?" Molly asks and they nod. She smiles as she clicks a button on her keys and lights flash on a car just a little way down the block. "Follow me on the drive. And be careful. The ice is slick as snot out here."

Will is careful where they step. They have been since they first hit snow after traveling far enough north. It was jarring to fall asleep in the car with sunshine making them a little *too* warm and wake up to the lightest of flurries leaving wet drops on the windshield.

"Well," Will says once the truck is roaring again and they're back on the road. "She's really something."

Duncan huffs a laugh and keeps his eyes on the road. A couple times Will has driven, but for the most part Duncan likes to. On their journey, he's driven through a tornado warning and a downpour so torrential they could hardly see six feet beyond the hood of the truck. Even though the only thing to see were the little red spots of tail lights that blinked brighter every so often, Duncan saw them through it.

"What do you think about all this?" Will asks him.

"I don't know," he says. "Depends on what we find when we get there."

In their hands, Will turns the case for the movie Duncan chose. They fiddle with the hollow, plastic thing until they pop it open. Will smiles when they see the title. "Do you think when she said she wanted you to chop wood, she meant she'd put you in the wood chipper?"

Duncan laughs and it's such a nice sound. "Maybe," he says while he's still smiling slightly. "You never know."

“We should have gotten a gun from one of those places advertised on the billboards,” Will muses. “Guns, fireworks, and Cracker Barrel.”

Duncan hums. The billboard advertisements might have been among the strangest parts of their drive – until now, maybe.

“If it comes to it, I think you can take her in a fight,” Will remarks.

Duncan smiles and at the stoplight, touches his hand to their thigh. Will smiles back, puts their hand over his. Then when the light changes, Will looks out of the window. There aren’t any billboards to be found anymore, just identical tree after identical tree, numerous and vast and seemingly endless. It gives the feeling of being eons and ages away. Time means something different when measured in the company of trees that have seen the ages.

They stop at a house by a lake. Molly parks by the bridge that crosses a portion of frozen water and Duncan does the same. He climbs out of the car and goes around to the other side to open Will’s door, which is about as strange as it isn’t.

As Duncan holds the door open and offers his arm to hold onto, he also murmurs, “Be careful.”

The snow on the ground isn’t too thick or too icy. It’s only enough to seem like more than a dusting. Will anchors their hand on Duncan’s shoulder more to pull him down than to pull themself up. They kiss him on the cheek and whisper in his ear, “You too.”

Molly waits for them on the porch and she fishes another set of keys from her pocket. There are a few different ones on a plastic keychain in the shape of a number one. At first, she tries one that turns out not to be correct, but the second one works and unlatches the deadbolt.

“My in-laws got rid of almost all of their furniture. Didn’t match the *Florida feel*,” she says as she pushes the front door open. “The rest of the family knickknacks will be in storage until someone has to execute the will.”

Inside, there’s a couch, a dining table with chairs, and a bed on a metal frame all in one big room. There’s everything to see and nowhere to hide. It’s nothing excessive and everything they need. There’s a kitchen with a fridge, a stove, and even a microwave. There are some lamps to offer a little light when either the sun goes down or the clouds hold it at bay.

“You’d have to pay all the utilities. The pipes freeze sometimes and the heat depends on how well you can build a fire,” Molly continues. “But it’s cozy. For a little family.”

From the moment they stepped in, Will has found it easy to imagine themself and Duncan there. Duncan could sit in the green wingback chair in semi-darkness with only a lamp and the fire to highlight the planes of his face and nuances of his expression. Will could easily fall asleep on the couch with the knowledge that Duncan would wake them when it’s time to tuck in under the covers.

Will can also imagine snuggling under those covers and feeling the warmth down to their toes. They can imagine tucking a baby between two pillows and making sure they’re

wrapped up in and surrounded by the coziness too. Will imagines the way they might watch the sunrise as it sneaks its way through the curtain and welcomes their baby to a chilly day with some much-needed warmth.

“I should be getting back to the store,” Molly finishes. “I’ll leave the keys with you while you make up your mind. Come by tomorrow and let me know what you’ve decided.”

Duncan takes the keys and then walks out with Molly, likely to make sure she leaves, carry in their belongings, and take a smoke break. Will watches from the window as the smoke billows out around Duncan’s mouth and floats up into the cold air. He brings in all their stuff in one trip and Will gets started on microwaving the food to warm it back up again.

When Duncan brings them some silverware and two glasses of water, he smiles at the mac and cheese. Will doesn’t end up regretting the meatloaf because apparently it’s one of Duncan’s secret favorite meals. They tease him and they smile at him as they eat and, once the meal is over, Will puts the DVD into the player and Duncan proves he knows how to make a fire big enough to keep toasty. As the lion roars on screen, Duncan takes a seat on the couch and Will lies down with their head in his lap.

The plastic bag crinkles as Will pops a bite of trail mix into their mouth. The movie starts out with soothing music that turns a touch more somber and then a bit *prouder* while Duncan’s hand settles on the side of Will’s belly. It’s barely past the intro sequence when Duncan starts to stroke back and forth along the swell.

“You’re supposed to be watching the movie, Duncan,” Will says when they know Duncan hasn’t heard a word of what Steve Buscemi’s character has to say.

“I’m watching,” Duncan rasps.

“Sure,” Will teases as they pop another dried cranberry into their mouth and then a glazed walnut. “Duncan?”

Duncan hums and just keeps on stroking, catching his thumb against Will’s belly button and keeping the baby up kicking to show off for their daddy.

“I like it here,” Will admits.

“Me too.”

Will tips their shoulders and turns their head enough to look up at Duncan as he looks back at them. They set aside their trail mix for a moment and lick the sugar and salt from their fingers before they tuck Duncan’s hair behind his ear and cup their palm against his cheek.

“Honey,” Will says with a singsongy sort of lilt. “We’re *home.”*

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes a bit of maneuvering to get out of bed and when their feet touch the cold floor, Will tries to keep the hiss quiet. They only just brushed off Duncan's hand and his sleepy grumbles. They keep the shuffle of their feet quiet on their way to the bathroom. The route isn't far and they've learned the way in the dark. Still, their nails trail along the wall as they go and catch on the ridges of the door frame just to be sure.

On their way back, they rub at their eyes and blink away any sleepy blurriness. Will sighs when the clock on the table at Duncan's side of the bed reads out *4:00AM.* Duncan has to do some chopping *and* delivering today, so his alarm is set for 4:30. With the way the baby kicks, Will knows they won't be falling back asleep before then so they might as well turn off the alarm.

"Should we be nice and make daddy some breakfast?" Will whispers when they're already on their way towards the kitchen.

Light spills from the bulb above the stove. It's not much but that's the point. Without walls to divide the rooms, the bulb that hangs from the ceiling without so much as a lampshade would wake up Duncan for sure. Meanwhile, the soft glow provides just enough light for Will to set the pan on a burner and turn it on. While the pan heats and sizzles, Will has enough time and illumination to look at the list tacked to the fridge with a magnet. There's a line down the middle of the crinkled piece of paper. On the left side reads *baby names* and on the right side is *dog names*.

Will and Duncan have each scribbled their suggestions and scratched out the ones that one or both of them ends up not liking. Will gives a hushed scoff when down near the bottom of the list in Duncan's handwriting is *Rusty*. They scratch out the name with the ballpoint pen that has its semi-permanent place on the counter. Then they add *Rusty* to the list on the right to join *Zoe, Winston,* and *Max*.

Will sets the plates on the table when they're finished cooking and try to not feel too jealous or yawn too hard when they smell Duncan's coffee. They set the steaming mug on Duncan's bedside table so that at least he's forced to smell it too.

"Duncan," they murmur as they sit on the edge of the bed by where Duncan is curled on his side.

Will chuckles as Duncan shifts his arm out from under the covers to wrap around their back. The angle is too odd and Will's belly is too round and heavy for Duncan to pull them on his own – no matter how much his bicep bulges and tenses, no matter how much muscle Duncan has built since he started his job. They indulge him as they scoot on the bed and let him press his cheek to their belly until his stubble threatens to poke through the fabric stretched across

their bump.

“You have to get up,” they tell him as they thread their fingers into his hair. They chuckle when he grumbles and rubs his cheek against Will’s belly like someone might grind their fingers into their eyes when they don’t want to believe how tired they can still be so tired in the morning. Will scratches their fingers against his scalp and tsks their tongue. “Have some coffee.”

Duncan drags his hand up Will’s back and curls it around their shoulder. Will can only bend so much towards him but he braces his elbow against the mattress and makes up the difference. Duncan presses his lips to theirs and Will hums as they kiss. Their head rushes and they feel woozy; it’s all so safe and *normal*. Their lips tingle as nerves fire and misfire trying to get Will to understand a new status quo. It’s difficult when Will feels like they would have to rewire their whole system before it’ll all compute and settle in.

Duncan just lets them brace their hand on his shoulder and welcomes as much weight as Will needs to lean on him. Duncan has always seemed so sturdy and steadfast. He was the quiet in a house party and the sanctuary by the bleachers. He was the safety and silence when there was yelling and glass breaking in the motel parking lot. He is the subdued certainty that everything will be alright.

Duncan trails his lips down Will’s neck and it only makes their head feel woozier. They tilt their head to make their throat easier for Duncan to kiss across and their words come out breathy: “You have to eat before Walter gets here.”

Duncan hums and an ache blooms under his lips and where his teeth dig in. He drags his tongue across what Will knows will be a bruise and his stubble brushes against the damp skin as he murmurs, “I could eat.”

“Very funny,” Will says with a sound that might have been a laugh but came out so breathy that it sounds like a gasp. “You don’t have enough time to do everything the way I want it.”

Duncan does laugh. Will can feel his lips spread for a smile and just a bit more of his teeth. “Maybe tonight then.”

Will sighs and smiles. “Maybe.”

Duncan still manages to eat breakfast and get ready by the time Walter’s headlights create lines on the curtains through the windowpanes. Duncan had been outside smoking his first cigarette of the day and ducked back in to give Will a freezing cold, smoke-scented kiss goodbye.

Will isn’t in charge of opening the store today, so they have a little more time to get ready before they’ll have to start the long drive to work. Still, they make sure to start warming the truck as soon as Walter’s taillights have left the driveway and *before* they’ve even thought much about getting dressed for the day. As long as it might take to navigate around their belly and pull on so many layers of clothing, it takes *longer* for the truck to feel warm enough that Will no longer questions if they’ll find themself frozen and stuck to the seat.

During the short walk from where they parked their car to the front door of the store, the air freezes as they exhale and a shiver runs up their spine when the wind picks up and blows straight through the otherwise sturdy fabric of their pants. Their beanie, Duncan's sweatshirt, and his jacket help to keep the rest of the cold at bay, but only just barely. Will still borrows Duncan's clothes and, at this point, the motivation no longer comes from keeping secrets but from cost, comfort, and the look in Duncan's eye.

"Well, good morning there," Molly says while the bell on the door is still ringing.

"Good morning, Molly," Will replies.

Their steps are especially careful as they drag their heels on the mat by the door, making sure to discourage any slipperiness once their shoes hit the tile. When they pull the hat from their hair, it's dotted with melted snowflakes and they drop it on the counter as they round to the other side.

Molly counts the cash in the till…then loses count and sighs when she has to start again. "Did you have as hard of a time getting Duncan out of bed this morning as I did Walter?"

"Might be something similar," Will says with a lopsided smile.

Will has gotten more used to Molly the more they've gone to work and stood by listening while Molly made small talk with the other customers. The part of Will's mind that has not quite rewired or adjusted still thinks about the woodchipper and how they'd joked with Duncan. But they're observing more and more how Molly asks questions of everyone and gives everyone her two cents. Will has even had times when she's simply said aloud what Will was thinking to themself.

"Duncan stayed up all night when we were out on the road," Will says with a sigh as they thread their fingers through the back of their hair and snag on a knot halfway down the strand. They work the knot between their fingers and wince. "Now that he can get a good night's sleep, it still doesn't seem like enough."

She hums and sets the cash back in the drawer and slides it closed with some clanking and a sharp click. She raises one brow as she looks at Will and asks, "How are *you* sleeping?"

"Fine," Will answers. They sit on the stool Molly brought behind the counter and hook the heels of their boots on the bottom rung. The weight of their belly sits heavy on their lap and pulls at their lower back, but it's better than nothing. "All things considered."

Molly chuckles and brushes the bangs to the side to get them out of her eyes. But they just fall back towards the front again. "Is that baby giving any signs of coming anytime soon?"

"No," they reply as they rub across their belly to feel how the baby's curled up in there. "That doctor you sent us to thinks it could be a while since this baby is my first."

Molly smiles at them a little more softly, a little more nostalgically. "You feeling nervous?"

“Of course,” Will says with a scoff. The pain, the act of bringing a new person into the world, the actual *raising of a baby*, there’s plenty to be nervous about. “How could I not be?”

“I think Walter’s planning on giving Duncan a talking-to during his lunch break,” Molly says, a little conspiratorially, but mostly pleasantly teasing. “A Dad pep talk.”

Thinking of Duncan smoking his lunchtime cigarette, humming and nodding his head along to sage advice that he’ll mull over during his job’s intervals of monotony, when he’s loading and unloading chopped logs from the back of a truck. Neither Will nor Duncan has anyone else to turn to for parenting advice and they hardly know what to make of their own parents. Will can only say for sure they know what *not* to do.

“Duncan’s never been what I worry about most,” Will remarks, smiling softly as the baby stirs and kicks in the space they have left. Will still hasn’t gotten used to the feeling and still can’t say they’re sick of it; Duncan’s the same way. He still has as much reverence and awe for the curve of Will’s belly and wonderful, growing creation within as he had so many months ago when they were bathed in the sunlight that trickled through the canopy and concerned themselves with *back to school*. “There’s no way Duncan could be anything other than a great dad.”

Molly opens her mouth to say something but the bell dings behind her and she slaps a cheery smile on her face before turning around. “Come in, come in!” she welcomes a regular customer. Will has learned that they’re almost all regulars around here. “Sure is cold out there, huh.”

The store has its ebbs and flows. Molly lets Will stay behind the counter and off their feet for the most part. They usually only need to get up when someone wants a pack of cigarettes from the shelf on the wall. Sometimes Molly works in the back on whatever ordering or stocking or other administrative stuff goes into running a store. Sometimes she leaves Will on their own so she can run errands or pick up Wally or everything else she has to do in a day.

Molly has left for the day when the little bell above the door rings yet again. Will knows their cheery smile isn’t as good or natural-seeming as Molly’s is, but their smile becomes much more natural when a *particular* regular comes through the door.

“Well, hello there, fine customer,” Will greets as they rise from the stool and get on their tiptoes to lean over the counter. Duncan’s lips twitch towards a smile in the way they do when he feels a little bit of happiness out of the blue. Will smiles back at him and also furrows their brow. “What are you doing here?”

“Finished early,” Duncan says. He reaches inside his sturdy, black coat and pulls out a wrapped box that’s a little wrinkled and bent from being pinned and hidden under his arm.

“What’s this?” Will asks as they eye their personal enigma. Duncan is full of quiet mystery and pleasant surprises.

“A present,” Duncan says, maintaining some of the mystery and all of his quiet pleasantness.

He sets the present on the counter for Will to see for themself.

They raise their brow and their smile tips towards something more teasing as they hook a finger in one of the many loops of plastic that makes a bow on the top. “For me?”

Duncan hums and smiles in a shyer sort of way. “And the baby.”

Will rips away the wrapping paper – neither of them is particularly sentimental about that sort of thing – and opens the box to find a soft, little blanket within. It’s a tan waffle weave that feels reliable and warm against their fingers. They resist the urge to press the blanket to their cheek, but only *just*. That’s something they’ll save for when Will and Duncan are home and can make the blanket smell more like *them* and less like a *store*.

Will looks up towards Duncan and before they can say a word, Duncan dips his hand under his coat again and pulls out another gift from under his arm; this time it’s not something easily wrapped. In his hand, Duncan holds a stuffed animal, a bulldog, by the looks of it. The dog’s top lip is sown in a way that makes it look a bit like the mustache Duncan has used winter to give himself an excuse to try to grow out.

Will laughs as they sit the little dog on top of their belly. They catch it in their hands when the stuffed animal slips down the curve. “We’ll have to give him one of the dog names.”

Duncan gives a laugh, just one, but it’s one that’s deep and resonant in his chest. “Rusty?”

Will hums and flicks one of the dog’s ears back and forth between their fingers. “I think it suits him,” they agree as they seat the dog on top of the box with the blanket, already watching over his domain. “See? We know when a name fits.”

“We do,” Duncan remarks, though Will knows he’s still unsure how they’ll manage to pick something *just right* when their baby could grow up and become so much more than what their parents could possibly expect.

Will would lean forward to kiss him except the bell dings above his head and he has to shuffle aside to let the door open wide enough that a family of four can come inside and get out of the cold. Will greets them like they should and the mom waves them off with cheery politeness as she rests her hands on her children’s backs and urges them past the candy aisle.

Will looks back to Duncan and sets their hand over his. His nails have dirt underneath and around his cuticles and he’s gained some callouses even if he wears gloves when he works. Meanwhile, Will’s nails have polish that’s so chipped it hardly seems fair to describe their nails as *painted* at all. The other hand only has one nail with even a single speck shiny black color on it. Will wonders if it would be too much to ask Duncan to do fix their nails for them – though they already know what Duncan would say if Will were to express that wonder aloud.

“Thank you,” Will says and hopes Duncan understands that there’s a lot more *appreciation* that’s just being saved for later.

The way Duncan looks it doesn't seem to matter to him if there's any more praise or gratitude to come. "You're welcome."

Wally comes out from the back where the bathroom is. He wipes his hands on the front of his sweater and luckily the navy color is too dark to see any damp spots. "Hi," he says, looking up at Duncan.

"Hello," Duncan replies. He and Wally haven't had much reason for their paths to cross. Meanwhile, Will sees Wally regularly when Molly brings him along to work. He's a good kid for many reasons and he's easily entertained or happy to entertain himself – though that may be in part necessity as an only child with parents who have to work more than play.

"Molly asked us to watch Wally," Will tells Duncan. "I was going to call and tell you when I thought you'd be done with work."

Duncan hums and puts his hands in his pockets.

"Just so they can have a night out," Will adds.

"That's fine," Duncan states easily, though he may be thinking about their own plans for the night. In truth, Will has been thinking about that too since Molly asked – really since Duncan suggested it this morning.

But if Duncan is an enigma, he's a patient one. He waits for Will until it's time to close the store. He helps with making sure everything is how it should be before the lights are switched off and the sign on the door is flipped over. He watches to make sure Wally doesn't slip on the step down to the sidewalk and then he offers his arm to Will to make sure they don't fall either.

Duncan is also the one to suggest that the three of them eat dinner at the diner. The drive out to their house is long and he probably only wants to make the drive between their house and Molly's just the once. Maggie greets them when they walk in, seating them at a booth and cleaning the mugs and plates off the table – and all while taking their drink orders. Even though Wally already knows what he wants, Maggie gives him the paper menu and bucket of crayons to amuse himself with anyway.

Wally picks a green crayon first and looks at Will in a particularly scrutinizing way considering that he's just a kid. Molly has told Will a couple of times how old Wally is, but they never seem to remember. *Maybe five? Maybe six?* Either way, he drags the bucket of crayons across the table with the kind of expectant nonchalance of a middle-aged man nudging a pitying whisky across the bar top. Maybe he learned it from his dad. Maybe Duncan received such a whiskey with his lunch today.

Will picks up a purple crayon and circles one of the words in the word search – *breakfast* – and feels themself successfully influenced to considering having breakfast for dinner. They wonder if Montana knows about chicken and waffles…

"My mom told me you're having a baby," Wally says while he puts an x on a game of tick-

tack-toe.

“We are,” Will remarks, forgetting all about the word search and putting a circle in a less-than-strategic place opposite Wally’s x.

Wally draws another x and then looks up at Will and furrows his brow in confusion, so much so that his eyebrows disappear under the edge of the dark brown bangs that create a solid line across his forehead. “Why?”

Will bites their lip as they put a little purple o between two x’s – *can’t make it too easy*. They consider what answer feels both most relevant and most true. “Because we wanted to, I guess.”

“Why did you want to?” Wally asks with an innocent curiosity and an honest lack of hesitation.

Will hums and touches their hand to their belly where the baby kicks. They smile as they glance at Duncan, who simply watches and probably feels some relief that *he’s* not the one being put on the spot. Though, Will thinks both of them would come up with similar simplified truths. “Because we love this baby.”

Wally doesn’t hum like they’ve made a good point. He simply continues on with another questioning, “Why?”

Will laughs and asks him instead, “Why not?”

“My dad says you’re too young to have a baby,” Wally recalls as he decides he prefers to pick up a new crayon and scribble in another corner.

“This belly here seems to say otherwise,” Will observes with a good-natured laugh as they rub from the top of the curve to the bottom and then across the bottom edge where their belly weighs heaviest on their palm.

Wally shrugs even as the crayon in his hand breaks from how he’s gripping it too hard. He simply puts it back in the bucket to join its other snapped and worn-down counterparts. “It’s just what my dad says.”

Will smiles even as the baby gives a particularly hard kick, the little one testing their strength despite supposedly running out of room. “Do you want to feel the baby?”

Wally looks up in surprise and futilely tries to brush his bangs towards one side of his forehead or the other. When Wally drops his crayon and presses his hand against Will’s bump, Will loops their fingers around his wrist to guide him to the spot where the baby is really testing their limits. Wally is wide-eyed as he feels the strength of the baby and the give of Will’s skin.

Duncan laughs quietly from the other side of the table. “It’s cool, isn’t it?”

Wally blinks his wide eyes at Duncan and nods. He keeps his hand where it is and feels the awe of nearly touching newly-forming life until Maggie has to ask him for his order a *second time* and he has to pay enough attention just long enough to say he wants a grilled cheese. Wally doesn't notice how Maggie tsks her tongue as she scribbles on her pad but Will can see how her smile is teasing.

Wally is kept captivated until the food comes and both the groaning of his stomach and the settling of the baby encourage him to at least pick up and nibble on half of his sandwich before it gets too cold. "What's the baby's name?" he asks while he's still chewing.

Duncan hums as he lifts a spoonful of chili and blows on the steam that rises from it. "We don't know yet."

"My dad's name is Walter and so is mine," Wally reminds them and he takes a sip of water from the straw.

"I know," Will reminds him too. They tilt their chin and lift a brow as they observe. "I don't think Duncan Jr. or Willy sounds as nice as *Wally."*

Wally nods his head in agreement, but he frowns at the lack of options that leaves him with.

"Duncan and I think we'll know the baby's name when we finally meet them," they assure him.

Wally looks much less disappointed by the idea of actually *meeting* the baby. "When?"

That's the big question most frequently and prominently on Will's mind. *When will the baby come?* The other question being whether Will would rather it be sooner or later. The aches and pains that they feel every day might encourage them to wish this baby would be born as soon as possible. But then those aches and pains may not seem to matter quite as much, not when compared to how much they don't want to miss out on a single moment of carrying and nurturing this baby and keeping the baby right by their heart.

"Depends on when the baby wants to come," Duncan says for them. "But not too long."

Wally eats a few more bites of his dinner while he thinks over everything he's learned and Will smirks at Duncan as they eat their breakfast. As Will glances between the two of them, Will wonders what habits this baby might pick up from Duncan the way Wally has from his parents. Maybe the baby will be quiet and reserved. Maybe someday they will find the baby sprawled out in a chair like Duncan does or hunching their shoulders like he does sometimes when he eats.

"Will?" Wally says as he swallows down a sip of water.

"Yes?" they answer with a smile waiting for whatever has captured Wally's curiosity now.

"How did you and Duncan make the baby?" he asks. "Because my dad said Duncan got you in trouble."

Duncan’s spoon falls into his bowl with an uncharacteristic clatter and Will laughs as Duncan’s cheeks turn a bit pinker – and not from the cold outside or the warmth of his meal.

Chapter End Notes

I've finished writing all of this fic (including an epilogue for Father's Day) and post it here. It feels so strange to be finished but this fic will always be dear to my heart.

The next chapter will be posted on July 17th. If you're interested in keeping up with the schedule you can find it here

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they wake up, Will is surprisingly warm. Duncan always puts out the fire before he goes to bed so the nights are filled with curling into Duncan's arms and burrowing under the weight of the many layers of blankets while trying to not get woken up by either the cold or the many ailments of late pregnancy. They'd last gotten up at 3am if they remember right. They'd squinted their eyes at the clock on the bedside table as they rubbed their arms and pulled back the covers. Everything feels coarser and sharper in the cold and Duncan's warmth made everything soft and soothing again. Now Will might border on *too warm*.

There's also much too much sunlight for it to be before Duncan's alarm was supposed to go off this morning – another day starts, another day of work. But the sun is high enough in the sky to shine through the curtains and still be strong enough to make Will squint when they open their eyes. They groan as they sit up enough to see the clock over the lump of blankets in the shape of Duncan beside them.

When there are no numbers to be seen and only the blank unlit background, Will knows the power went out sometime in the early morning. It's certainly not the first time. Will just usually manages to wake up in time to catch it. They're surprised to see how much they've managed to sleep this time. Duncan might be hibernating. His snores are quiet, muffled by the blankets until Will cuddles in close with their head under his chin.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Will murmurs as they tuck the chilled tip of their nose against the side of his neck just beyond the stubble. When they tuck their freezing cold toes under his leg, Duncan groans.

He rubs his cheek against Will's hair and his stubble catches on a few of the strands. "What time is it?"

"Way past the time you were supposed to get up," Will says with a huff of a laugh that brushes against Duncan's throat. Will might be able to feel the goosebumps that rise in the wake.

"What?" Duncan rasps, rolling to his back and craning his neck to see for himself that the clock has nothing and everything to tell him. Duncan groans again as he lifts one of his hands to drag across his eyes. "I didn't hear Walter come by."

"Maybe we would have if we had a dog," Will suggests – and not for the first time. Will has to see the pet shop every time they go to work and the list of dog names on the fridge is longer than the list of human ones. None of them seem to sound quite right. Will's starting to think none of them will sound right until there's a face to put them to.

Duncan chuckles. "We'll have a baby to make sure we wake up early in the morning," he

says as he touches his hand to the swell of Will's belly to feel for the shape of a baby that's already turned and sunk way down low.

Will is glad they don't have to be worried about being late for work themself. The baby pulls too harshly on their lower back to find standing behind the counter comfortable for very long – or sitting for that matter. One day they went into work and Molly told them not to come back until they bring a baby with them. Will doesn't know when that baby will actually make their arrival and, for that matter, how long it will take to feel good about having the little one away from home no matter how well-bundled up they are. They try to imagine a little baby in the baby-sized snowsuit Molly gave them but still Will's reminded of how cold their toes and nose feel and how disappointed they are when Duncan lets in the cold air as he pulls back the covers.

Will makes a complaining sort of noise when Duncan pulls back the curtains and lets more of the sun in. Their back twinges with pain as they roll onto it. Their belly is heavy and arcs in a sizable mountain under the covers. They walk their fingers to the peak and tip their chin up to look back at Duncan. "How bad is it?"

Duncan hums as he still stares out the window. "Hard to say."

Reluctantly, Will pushes themself upright and scoots their way off the mattress. When they join Duncan at the window, they see what he means. The world outside their little home is so thoroughly blanketed in white that it's hard to tell if it's a few inches or a few feet deep.

"I guess Walter's had to give you the day off," they observe. "A *snow day.*"

As they say it, Will is struck by how that reminds them that they should be in school right now. That feels like a lifetime away. They can't imagine waking up and expecting to go to school in the morning. They can't fathom walking the halls and sitting at a desk without a smidge of sympathy to be found in the eyes of teachers and peers alike. They can't imagine the home they go back to being the one that belongs to their father.

Their back hurts more and less at once. The pain comes and goes and Will might complain except for glad they are to remember the kinds of pain they *don't* have to dread coming. They take Duncan's hand and squeeze it as tight as the clenching grip around their heart. Duncan squeezes back and looks away from the snowy tundra outside.

"I'll get you breakfast," he says as he brushes his thumb against the tension held in Will's hand. His touch stays gentle even as Will's nails might dig into his skin.

Will flexes their fingers and rolls their neck as they sigh. "I think without the power it will have to be cereal."

Duncan hums and nods. He knows the drill. This isn't the first time they've been snowed in and it won't be the last. That's the price of living in Middle-of-nowhere, Montana in an old house. The first time it happened, it took Duncan all day just to clear enough snow to get to the end of the driveway. When they'd woken up to more snow the next day, it seemed rather pointless to fight Mother Nature.

Will goes to the bathroom and Duncan hands them a bowl of cereal once they're settled back in bed. Then he heads to the front door to step just far enough outside to smoke. He can take his time with it now that they have a whole day with not a lot to do. The crib was put together long ago alongside the rocking chair and a dresser for all the little one's many clothes. They have what seems like a lot of diapers but Molly says they'll only last as long as one blink of the eye.

Will touches along the expanse of their belly and then curls their arm around it to cradle the curve. Somehow, the bigger their belly has gotten and the more they've had something to hold in the turn of their elbow, the more they've been able to envision the baby within fitting in their arms just like that. But even Will's imagination fails them sometimes and no matter how hard they try, nothing they imagine seems to satisfy the longing they have to finally see what this little being they've been carrying looks like – and to finally see what it looks like for Duncan to hold them.

Duncan brushes his feet against the mat by the door before he comes back inside. He toes his boots off with well-practiced ease. When he gets back in bed, he's the one with the cold toes in need of warming.

"Hey!" Will complains with a laugh. Though the chill from outside clings to the surface of Duncan's skin, they still curl in closer. "While I'm still cooking your child, you're supposed to keep *me* warm."

"You're supposed to be patient," Duncan grumbles as he wraps his arm around Will. "It's taking you long enough."

Will looks up to catch Duncan *smiling* and they can't help but *laugh.* To catch Duncan smiling and joking will always tip the scales in his favor. But they'll try to stand their ground while they still have the ultimate leverage. Will smirks as they suggest, "You should make it up to me."

Duncan hums and tightens the hold of his arm further and, when they're pressed belly-to-belly, Duncan already seems warmer. He leans down and brings their lips together for a kiss. That kiss leads to another and then another. He hums deep in his throat and moves on to kissing the side of Will's neck – *playing dirty*.

Will moans like he knew they would and they grip their fingers in the back of his hair. Their laugh is much more breathy as the press of Duncan's lips brings with it the drag of stubble. "This is rewarding you."

"Are you saying you won't enjoy it?" Duncan mumbles against their skin.

Will licks their lips. They would enjoy it very much. But Duncan's never been stingy where that's concerned and as Will's hand drags along his back, the edges of their jagged nails catch on his clothes. "Do my nails," they bargain, words coming out chopped as their breath catches and stutters. "Then do me while they dry."

Duncan's chuckle might be too quiet to hear but not too soft to feel as Duncan gives one last kiss to their throat. There's another gust of cold air again when he gets out of bed to fetch what they'll need. He lays the nail file, clippers, and bottle of deep red polish on top of the blankets for Will's approval. Will groans as they push themself up to lean back against a couple of pillows cushioning the wrought iron headboard. One hand is held out towards Duncan and the other rests against the huge swell of their belly. It hardly feels like there's any space for all their organs even as the curve extends far out into their lap.

The baby shifts a bit as Duncan tries to file Will's nails on their right hand to make some sort of shape that makes sense using what's been left behind by their nails breaking. He might as well just cut them all short but they both enjoy the scrape of Will's nails when they're a little longer. Duncan maintains a quiet concentration as he works and files and Will smiles thinking of how those great big hands that hold the top to the nail polish bottle are the same ones that would be out chopping wood today.

"You're getting better at it," Will praises as Duncan paints the nail on their pinky finger and barely gets any nail polish beyond the cuticle. "Getting ready for the real challenge of painting the teeny tiny nail beds little kids have."

Duncan's laugh would be a huff but it's muffled by focus into a quick hum. He lets go of that hand for now and reaches for the other to get started on the nails on that one. This is where any job Duncan does will be better than Will could do with their non-dominant hand. He dips the brush in the bottle again and says, "You might have to do that."

Will raises a brow even though Duncan's not looking anywhere but their pointer finger. "I believe you're a quick learner."

Duncan hums and *does* manage to catch sight of Will pressing their hand to their belly carefully so as to not ruin the first layer of polish. "Are you nervous?"

Will considers as they tap the pads of their fingers and watch the bright red against the black of Duncan's sweater that Will has taken as theirs to share. "Yes and no."

"Me too," Duncan agrees as he paints the nail on their middle finger.

"I have a hard time believing it and at the same time, I don't," Will muses. They've thought about it a lot and still can't seem to shift the feeling much or make sense of it any better. "I'm ready to have them here and not."

Duncan hums. They both know he knows exactly what Will means. Will knows Duncan finds all of this just as surreal as they do.

"I'm glad all this happened to us," Will says – even as their back hurts from sitting like this and their womb squeezes to remind them to stay vigilant for what is to come. Will isn't sure what *practice* contractions are supposed to do other than acclimate them to the panic of thinking they might be going into labor.

"Me too," Duncan agrees. He ducks his head and lifts Will's hand to kiss their knuckles.

“And I’m not just saying some cheesy thing,” Will insists. “I mean it.”

They’ve never really enjoyed the sentiments of *everything happens for a reason* or that *hardship makes you stronger*. But they wouldn’t prefer to be anywhere else or doing anything else. They wouldn’t prefer to be worrying about homework or pop quizzes. Will wouldn’t recommend a baby and running away and living in motel rooms to most people – *teens or adults* – but Will wouldn’t want anything else for the two of them.

“I know,” Duncan assures them, pressing another kiss to their fingers and resuming his work.

Duncan paints layer after layer until the red is vibrant and covered by a clear coat that’s the only thing left to dry. While Duncan sets everything aside on the bedside table next to the clock that still won’t turn on, Will blows air on their nails to help them along. Then he slips his hands around to Will’s lower back and encourages them to scooch far enough that he can pull them to the end of the bed. As Will’s legs hang over the edge, they just lie back and hold their hands in a way that keeps from smudging any of the polish.

Goosebumps erupt along Will’s skin as Duncan peels away the sweatpants they borrowed from him too. There’s no underwear of any sort underneath and the chill in the air makes them all the more sensitive to Duncan’s touch. If not for the fire Duncan lit before he treated himself to his cigarette, their panting breaths and moans might come out so heavily that they could freeze in the air in front of their very eyes.

Duncan strokes his finger so gently but so surely against Will’s hole and uses the same care and certainty to press a kiss to their belly – at first over the sweatshirt and then directly against the stretched skin. His stubble scratches where Will’s skin has been stretched so much and so far that they have little red marks to show for it.

“Duncan,” they gasp, wishing they could put their fingers back in his hair and grip until he does what they want. They can only hold their hands up and open with the backs resting against the blankets and fingers curled just enough to keep the polish pristine. *“Duncan, please.”*

The pressing in of Duncan’s fingers isn’t exactly what they’d been asking for and it only makes them feel more open and more desperate to be filled, so vulnerable and so desperate to be surrounded and to surround him. When Duncan *finally* fills them with his cock instead, they feel his belly pressed to theirs once more. And though Duncan’s work has made him sweat and build muscle, his middle still manages to feel soft in comparison to the tension held in Will’s belly – a tension always seeming on the verge of reaching a tipping point.

Duncan’s fingers carefully slip between Will’s right by the webbing in between them, avoiding creating a mess when they’ve both been so careful and allowing Will to curl their fingers where they intertwine. When they tilt their head, they see the ruby red fingernails against the veins that stand out on the backs of Duncan’s hands.

“Beautiful,” Duncan grunts as he pulls out nearly all the way and pushes back in again. He demonstrates the knowledge he holds about both of their bodies as he manages to hold

himself up enough to not risk squishing their baby but still maintains power in the movement of his hips. “Handsome,” he groans as he sinks in deep.

“I love you,” Will says through the jagged way air fills their lungs and leaves them. *“Oh,”* they moan when another thrust pushes their breath out when they weren’t expecting it. Their belly and their baby give them so little room to breathe. Their muscles feel so drawn taught and exhausted that they can barely even tremble. Will can only squeeze their hand and their hole as their belly and back spasm with the want to clench down and *come*. And so they squeeze Duncan’s hand and feel all the pleasure he gives them as they moan, “I love you *so much.”*

Duncan grunts as he spills. His arms go rigid to keep himself from collapsing on top of them and the shaking in his muscles might match how Will feels. Their head rushes with so many sensations and feelings all at once, so many wants and needs that have been met or are anticipated, so much to cherish in this moment and in memory and so much more to await and look forward to...

Duncan helps them to curl up back under the covers and though his toes are cold from the wood floor, Will doesn’t complain. They just tuck the blankets tighter around them both as Duncan kisses the hair at the crown of their head and murmurs, “Thank you for having a baby with me.”

It’s Will’s heart that might seem to swell to bursting then and they whisper back, “Thank you for giving me a baby to have.”

Duncan hums and rubs his hand across their belly as he says, “Anytime.”

Chapter End Notes

We're so close to the end :')

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will groans when they wake up. They rub their fingers against their eyes and feel the crusty bits in the corners. Their knuckles then go to their back to try to knead out the ache, but that's not so easy to chip away at. When they push themselves to sit upright, they immediately want to collapse back against the mattress again even though the mattress clearly isn't without its discomforts. Their nap was nice but Will only woke up hurting more. Any relaxation that Duncan's touch and affection might have given them disappeared into the springs that dug into their back.

The covers rustle and Duncan is humming as his fingers drift to replace Will's to rub against their lower back. Will sighs and curls forward around their belly as much as they can without feeling like they're squishing the baby too much or forcing all the air out of their lungs with the lack of space left in their body.

"The power's back on," Duncan murmurs.

"That's good," Will says, glancing beyond the cascade of their hair to see the alarm clock flashing. The time is not *correct,* but it's a start. "Will you help me up?"

Will almost regrets asking as soon as Duncan takes his hands away. They feel torn between so many different pulls. It's a restlessness and an exhaustion. Nothing feels content or settled but Will also can't say that anything feels *wrong*. All they can do is start with a trip to the bathroom; after that, they can try to figure out if today is a total wash and they might as well just try to hide under the covers until the tundra finally passes.

When Will washes their hands, they catch sight of themself in the mirror like they always do. But this time, as they dry their hands on a towel, they might actually *see* themself for the first time in who knows how long. Looking now, they don't see the incremental changes that happen slowly and surely and sneak up on them. Instead, they see the person climbing in Duncan's window with a pregnancy test hidden in their bag. The sweatshirt they wear could never hide the swell of their belly no matter how they might have managed to before. When they lift up the sturdy, black fabric above the curve of their belly, it almost seems comical how they've grown, except for how *awe-inspiring* it is.

Will spreads their hand against the swell and even with their fingers as far apart as they can be, the spots of red from their fingernails seem to pale in comparison to the sheer magnitude of how Will's body has changed as their baby has grown from almost nothing. Trying to wrap their head around it almost makes them woozy. Their hands grip at the edge of the sink as they might teeter. A pain that starts at their back wraps itself around their belly with an intensity that makes them gasp. That inspires its own sort of awe.

The faucet hasn't been touched since the power went out. They have to wash their hands with

bottled water when that happens. Not to mention that Will would find it very easy to believe that the pipes were frozen too. The drip that trickles forms a puddle at Will's feet. They flinch and look down though they have no hope to see past their belly. In absence of proof they can see, their hand shakes as they reach between their legs for proof they can *feel.*

"Duncan!" they shout when they feel the damp against their fingertips and there's no denying that. They wipe their fingers off on a part of Duncan's sweatpants that *isn't* completely soaked and furrow their brow as the worry starts to rattle at their ribcage.

"Will?" Duncan answers as he appears in the bathroom doorway.

There may not be a lot for Duncan to tell is different; that's the thing about black clothing. Below the shadow of Will's belly, there may be no visible damp patch.

"I—" Will starts to explain and when they feel the start of another aching, cramping pain, something in their brain just seems to *click* and send them whirring.

The pain isn't *that much* different from what has been happening since Will first woke up today, but now it has a certain *pang*. It's not just one of many instances of *practice* seemingly intended to persuade them to desperately want this baby *out already*. But what Will desperately wants at this moment is to keep them *in.* They press a hand to their belly and lick across their lips as they massage a hand against the squeeze of their womb. When they're forced to acknowledge that it will do nothing to ease the pain, they squeeze their hand over their eyes and feel the tears against their palm.

Duncan's hand touches the bare skin of Will's belly and maybe he feels for himself that these contractions mean business. Will certainly feels so thoroughly *crushed* that they'd expect their belly to convey that somehow. To feel all that agony and have nothing to *show* how truly terrifying it is would seem to be an extra dose of cruelty.

When Will's gasping, cut-off sob breaks the silence, Duncan's hum soon accompanies it. When Will allows their hand to drop from over their eyes, Will sees both of them looking back in the mirror. The look in Duncan's eye might be the same as the one he'd had when Will first dropped the pregnancy test into his hand.

"My water broke," Will says before they can rethink it too much.

The look in Duncan's eye might shift to something more akin to when he'd picked them up in that coffee shop. Will isn't sure if that's better or worse. Duncan might not know either. When his hand stands still against Will's belly, they might both be having the same thought: *It's really happening.*

"You're okay," Duncan assures them and he seems to believe it. His hand becomes unfrozen and resumes the usual stroking and affection Duncan usually gives their belly. Will can see it in the mirror as they feel it and something about that *does* help them to feel a bit more aligned – *a bit*.

Will sighs and lays their hand over Duncan's, feeling the ridges of knuckles and spread of his

fingers. “We’re stranded in a snowstorm and my pants are soaked with *amniotic fucking fluid*.”

Duncan presses a kiss against Will’s hair and just says, “We should change your clothes.”

Will allows him to peel the damp fabric away and use it to soak up what drips have formed a little puddle on the floor. They brace their hand on his shoulder as their feet slip through the pantlegs one at a time. Goosebumps raise across their skin when cold air fills open space and their brain tries to sort through every piece of information ever given in doctor appointments, pamphlets, and books.

Duncan has left home with books and returned from a day of work with notes in the margins and pages covered in yellow highlighter. He was a good student in school, but he never seemed to need to study so much for a test until this one. Will was just planning on cramming. This test was supposed to be open book. They weren’t *supposed* to have to know everything.

While Duncan takes their soaked sweatpants to put with the laundry, Will decides to phone a friend. They look out the window while the phone rings, rocking back and forth from the balls of their feet and back to their heel. Will just tries to be grateful that at least the line is *ringing*. As long as there’s a line to ring, they’re not too proud to keep calling until someone answers.

“Hello?”

“Molly,” they gasp with relief. They no longer need to brace themself to ask for Molly and possibly endure chitchat while she’s found. “It’s Will.”

“Oh, Will,” Molly says happily. They’ve talked on the phone more since Will stopped working, enough to even having Will starting to like it. “There’s too much snow for people to get their firewood, can you believe that? Montana winters reward forward thinkers.”

“Molly,” they interrupt with bated breath. The pain makes sure Will remembers that there’s no time today to discuss the mundane things in life. “The baby is coming.”

Molly pauses and then remarks, “I’ll admit I didn’t think of that.”

“We’re stuck,” Will says as they grip their hand in their hair to give something to hold onto and some other sensation to think about than the pain that already has their knees threatening to tremble.

Molly sighs and Will can practically hear how she pins the phone between her cheek and her shoulder to have her hand free to fiddle with her bangs. “We should’ve gotten you a four-wheeler and a snowplow as a baby-warming present.”

“I can’t do it.”

There’s no dancing around it. As much as saying it brings the panic closer to the surface,

there's no room for pretending. Will always knew their body wouldn't care about their comfort when it decided it would be time for birth, but Will hadn't thought it would be such an *emotional* effort. The pain was meant to be in their belly, not threatening to rip their heart out.

Molly hums; it's a soft, comforting sound. Will never had an opportunity to know what it's like to have a mother, but they think that maybe that's how it sounds. Molly's voice is both tender and firm as she says, "No matter what you say you can or can't do, this baby has to come out."

The snow still so thoroughly blankets everything outside that it fosters the feeling of being alone in the world even as Molly whispers encouragement in their ear. "We can't do it by ourselves," they say, barely louder than a whisper.

"You've done a lot more by yourselves than most people ever do," she counters kindly.

But Will isn't in the mood for kindnesses, especially when their mind creates two worst-case scenarios per every bit of kindness. They've been on their own because they ran away from the house in the nice neighborhood and the Andersons, who would have had Will tucked away in the nicest hospital. They'd run away from their dad's accusations that *they're just stupid kids.*

"If we mess it up, our baby dies."

"When Wally was born, I waited until Walter got home from work to tell him I was in labor and ended up giving birth in the car *right outside* the emergency room," Molly tells them. "All Walter had to do was catch him. He even tore his shirt off just to have something to wrap Wally in. The doctors all came rushing out *after* it was already over."

Will knows Duncan would give this baby the shirt off his back without question. He'd tear it to shreds if that's what it took. In a way, he probably already has. He's given Will his clothes, let them get stretched out and soaked, and then just took them to the laundry without complaint. Duncan left behind consistent means and relative comfort for a life on the road without certainty from one day to the next.

When the next contraction comes, Will has a lump in their throat. Their breath can't get out and neither can their words; both have been stolen away by a pain that's only getting worse and worse. The only way that air and sound will come out is as a groan.

Molly waits until their groan has passed before she urges, "Let me talk to Duncan."

Will nods even though Molly can't see them. They close the curtains on the window and turn around to Duncan already watching and waiting, keeping an eye on them even when Will isn't looking. When they hold the phone out to him, Duncan takes it easily, but doesn't bring it to his ear until after he's helped Will to sit back on the bed. He then takes the phone outside for a little chat over a cigarette.

Will rubs both hands over their belly. They might no longer hope to ease the pain but they

can still appreciate the feel of their baby while they're still tucked away inside. They can already feel the baby so *low*. They'd already dropped quite a bit by the last doctor's appointment, but now the baby feels not only deep in their pelvis, but very much on their way out.

"Please, be okay," Will whispers as their hands start to shake. Their knees threaten to knock against each other as Will does their best to keep them closed. *"Please, little one."*

As they await yet another round of pain, they begin to retreat inwards. Their shoulders slump even as they keep their legs tensed. They tip their head back and think of somewhere else where the river isn't frozen over in the cold and fish are wriggling on the line. Will might feel the pain of the hook in their lip as they bite just a bit too hard with the sharp peak of a contraction.

Duncan sinks the mattress as he sits down next to them. "Molly is going to call the hospital," he states. "But she told me what to do."

Will nods even as their head wobbles. They rest their temple against his shoulder to steady their brain swirling in their skull. "Try not to be scared, hmm?" Will says, words trailing off as they grimace. They wince and carry on: "I didn't think I could be more scared. Should have known, my luck."

"You're brave," Duncan says as he takes Will's hand with the nails he painted so carefully.

Will laughs, a huff, a scoff. The sound is choked off when even just a quick laugh feels jarring enough to make their belly ache.

"You've kept our baby safe and *ours*," Duncan murmurs. He tucks his nose into Will's hair, but it's Will who gets a waft of the smell of smoke. "And you've been so good at it, too."

"Buttering me up before I squeeze out your baby," Will says and they can't help but smile. "Is that what Molly told you to do?"

Duncan hums. "She was a bit more graphic."

Will laughs again, but this time with a bit more genuine humor. "I can believe that."

Duncan gathers water and towels. The baby's blankets will stay folded away until the mess is over. Will contemplates trying to drag labor out for as long as possible with the hopes that *help* will come in time. But the more that it hurts, the more their resolve wanes. As each contraction comes to an end, they know there will be another one for longer and more often. The clock on the nightstand never got set and doesn't offer any help at all to feeling like they could keep track of anything. Eventually, the contractions don't feel like they ever stop.

They have the shoulder of the sweatshirt Duncan's wearing between their teeth. They can feel spite soaking into the fabric as sweat seems to soak them all over. Duncan's kneeling on the floor by the edge of the mattress and wouldn't dare complain about his legs falling asleep. He's situated between Will's knees, which have inched themselves wider apart as the first

sign that Will is starting to give in.

“Molly said not to push until you absolutely have to,” Duncan reminds them. His hands sit at their lower back, but only just rest there. They learned through trial and error that as much as rubbing and kneading could ease pain, they also sometimes sharpen it. And all Will really wants is to simply feel Duncan there.

“I don’t think I can stop it,” Will says, tears dripping from their lashes to wet Duncan’s sweatshirt some more.

Their legs tremble uncontrollably and they groan with the pain of resisting giving in. They shift their hips and arch their back but neither has any hope to truly appease their body’s commands. They grip their hands in Duncan’s sweatshirt and clench their hands hard as they try to hold it all in. Down to curling their toes in their socks all of their muscles tense, fighting a battle that they are eventually bound to lose.

“That’s okay,” Duncan says, breathing in and out deeply the way Will is supposed to be.

Will can only seem to manage sharp, small breaths punctuated with broken, staccato noises. They furrow their brow and dig their face so deep into Duncan’s shoulder that their words might be completely muffled: “I have to push.”

Duncan hums but doesn’t move before Will tells him to. Instead, he asks, “Will you let me look at you?”

Will nods, though their limbs are so shaky and exhausted that Duncan nearly has to haul them up the bed. He’d probably use a kinder word like *lift* or *help*, but Will doesn’t feel the need to be generous. They’re spreading their legs for their boyfriend, but when he pushes his fingers in, it’s not for anything like pleasure. Will tilts their head back and strains their neck as Duncan feels for their baby’s head.

“I can feel them,” Duncan says. His voice is the softest rasp, not with hesitance but with amazement and maybe some disbelief too. Will almost can’t believe it either.

“What?”

Will furrows their brow and grits their teeth some more as Duncan feels around a little more just to confirm, “I feel the baby’s head.”

“Fuck.”

Duncan chuckles and pulls his fingers away as he presses a kiss to Will’s knee. His stubble brushes against their oversensitive skin as he murmurs, “I love you.”

“Fuck,” Will says again as yet another pain – *or maybe the last one never ended?* – grips at Will so hard that now it *definitely* can be seen. Their womb starts to rise and Will’s words come out in a rush before the pain can snatch them away: “You’re lucky I love you.”

“I am,” Duncan agrees with another kiss to the knob of their shaking, trembling knee. “I think you should push.”

Will continues to fight the pain, maybe because now it’s habit. They shake their head and wait until the contraction and the urge to push aren’t quite so agonizing. Their panting breath comes out in a huff as they ask, “Are you sure?”

“I think the baby is making our decisions for us,” Duncan remarks as he reaches for one of the towels he set aside.

“Yeah,” Will sighs, brushing the hair that’s sticking to their forehead with sweat. Their heart is thundering in their chest with a rush of adrenaline that Will would have thought they’d exhausted by now. They’re still breathing like they’ve *already* run the marathon. “Wonder where they got that from.”

Will lifts their feet to dig the heels of their feet into Duncan’s shoulders on either side. Duncan leans forward a bit so that their legs might be opened wider. The relief and exhilaration of being able to *finally* push only lasts long enough for Will to recognize that pushing itself is a *two steps forward, one step back* situation. They’ll tuck their chin to their chest and push as hard as they can and use all the longing and hopes for a healthy baby to keep them going…only to lose half their progress. They might feel like they’re being personally punished when *burning* and *stinging* are added on top of everything else.

“You’re so close,“ Duncan says when Will’s last push ends with a sob. He takes their hand with the pretty red nail polish and brings it down between their legs to feel the hair on their baby’s head. “Feel for yourself.”

It’s strange to feel something that’s not themself. This baby that has been a part of them for what feels like forever will soon be their own person in the world. This baby will come from them and become their own. When Will pushes again, they think of putting bows in the baby’s hair and hats on their head. The more wide open they spread themself to make room for this baby in the world, the more they feel like those hats are going to have to be pretty big.

Finally, *finally*, two steps forward and one step back gets them where they need to go and the baby’s head is born. Will gasps when they feel it slide out at last and they pant into the air while they wait for Duncan to tell them they can keep going. As soon as they’re given permission, it’s just one more push to have the rest of the baby born into Duncan’s hands.

Will couldn’t possibly describe how they feel when they hold their baby for the first time. Joyous awe, miraculous amazement, all-encompassing love, the deepest and most profound affection: there are words that could be used in combination with each other but would still only be an *approximation* at best. Will knows in the depths of their minds and every cell of their body that this is a feeling the likes of which neither Will nor Duncan has ever known. As the baby cries, Will cries and smiles, and Duncan is laughing and crying too. Duncan dabs the corner of his eye and the edge of his nose against his shoulder, eyes glimmering with more tears ready to fall.

Duncan crawls up the bed to lie next to them. Though he just caught the baby and handed them over, the brush of his fingertips against the little one's back is as gentle as can be. As Will looks at their partner and child, they think the little, perfect, newborn baby might have Duncan's lips. As soon as the baby settles, their lips pout and purse a little like his do sometimes. What a precious thing it is to get the opportunity to see cherished parts of their partner replicated, giving Will twice as many opportunities to adore them.

Will licks across their cracked lips with a dry tongue as they hold their sweet little baby against their chest. "There was a word I saw once that meant *the warmth of the sun in winter,"* they recall as they glance towards Duncan for his approval. "Apricity."

Duncan brushes the back of his finger against the baby's round little cheek where the last sun of the day shines through the window and sneaks past the curtain. His voice rumbles like the crunch of snow as he echoes:

"Apricity."

Chapter End Notes

Just an epilogue left!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's the perfect day to be smoking outside. The tip of spring into summer has encouraged the grass greener and made the breeze even more welcome and appreciated. The sun is setting and the temperature outside is nice in a way that encourages letting some fresh air in. And though Duncan blows the smoke out and away, he's still near enough to the open window to hear the voices that drift out.

"Miss Priss?" Will says to start off with.

Little Miss Apricity hums the way everyone says is exactly like Duncan does. The hum usually comes with a wrinkle of her brow and a frown. It was one of the first ways she started to show her personality – namely her *stubbornness.*

Will huffs a laugh and there's a sound of sorting through crayons across the surface of their wooden coffee table. "What do you remember about Daddy Day?"

"For daddies," Apricity recalls. Her words aren't the *clearest* but those who love her are experts in interpretation when they need to be. "For when daddies are good."

"That's true," Will agrees, probably nodding their head and raising their brows in the way they do to encourage her clever little mind. It's also genuinely easy for Will to feel curious about their little one's inner workings. "Do you think Daddy has been good?"

"Yes!" Apricity shouts and Duncan smiles so quickly and easily it might be akin to a reflex.

No matter how doom-and-gloomy her parents might have considered themselves to be, Apricity is all boldness and vibrancy. She shouts and she plays and she tries to boss everyone around. As exhausting and frustrating as she can be at times, she has also made them smile more since she was born than they may ever have in their whole life before then.

"Has Daddy been good enough to get a present?" Will asks next.

"Two presents!"

"Two presents?" Will questions teasingly. "Daddy must have been very good. What should we give him?"

"Unicorn shirt," Apricity states as if there is no question or debate to be had about it. Duncan also knows her little pout without having to see it. She sticks out that little bottom lip and her cheeks look extra sweet and round. If she scrunches her nose that looks exactly like Will's, then Duncan is almost certainly a goner.

“A unicorn shirt!” Will repeats with a scoff. Will’s nose might scrunch too with their teasing smile. “Another one?”

Ever since Apricity has decided on a preference for pink over black, she’s refused to let that mean that she no longer dresses like her parents. And so, Duncan now has a t-shirt with a unicorn ever since Will and Apricity found one in his size when shopping with Molly.

“Rainbow,” Apricity says, conceding to the point about redundancy, but standing firm on the concept.

“That would make you happy, wouldn’t it?” Will asks, knowing full well that Apricity would happily see Duncan’s entire closet replaced.

“Yes,” Apricity says, probably shaking her head hard enough for her pigtails to knock against her cheeks.

“What present would make *Daddy* happy?”

Duncan is drawing in a drag of his cigarette when his baby girl states: “Smokes.”

Duncan has to put quite a bit of effort into not letting his laughter make him choke. He tries to keep his coughing to a minimum lest he interrupt. He rubs his hand against where the smoke feels caught in his lungs and stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray on the banister.

“We’re not getting Daddy *smokes* for Daddy Day,” Will says with a laugh they don’t have to restrain. It’s a lovely sound that Duncan has been grateful to hear many times since they arrived in their home out in the woods. More colored pencils clack against each other and there’s the sound of coloring within the lines and big, messy scribbles across paper. “Miss Priss,” Will starts again, though this time a little less teasing. “What would you think about a baby sibling?”

“For Daddy Day?”

“Well, that present wouldn’t come on Daddy Day, but a bit later.”

Apricity sighs and says, “Don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Since when?” Will teases with the exaggerated smacking noises that come from kissing against a soft, little cheek. “You always know.”

She hums again as she takes time to consider. What comes after that is always a surprise. “Wally has a sibling?”

“Wally doesn’t have a sibling,” Will reminds her. “Wally is an only child.”

“Wally can be my brother?” she offers as a possible solution.

She’s gotten to spend a good chunk of time with Wally in her life so far. Since before she can

probably even remember, she has gone to work with Will from time to time. Most of Molly's frequent customers had no problem with there being a baby to coo over during checkout. Duncan would come by the store and be treated to the sight of Will ringing up customers with their baby strapped to their chest.

Apricity will most easily remember all the time she's spent with Wally more recently. Molly has asked Will and Duncan to pick Wally up from school and/or let him stay the night so that they can take him to school in the morning. Walter's doctor is an hour away and important enough that any appointment time is one that will be worked around.

"Wally can be *like* a brother," Will encourages. "But he lives with his mom and dad. A sibling would live with us."

"Yes!" Apricity shouts and Duncan imagine that she might have spit a little with the excitement.

"Yes?" Will asks again just to be sure.

"Yes, Zazzy!"

Will lets out a startled *oof* as they're no doubt tackled by a little one who doesn't know her own strength. Or maybe she does and just doesn't care. "Thank you for your permission," Will says, though the words are strangled a bit by breathlessness.

"You're welcome," she replies with that sort of joy that when it happens seems limitless. When she's crabby, that feels less so.

When Will laughs, Duncan has to imagine the quieter, softer kisses they're pressing against Apricity's nearly-blonde hair. "I hope Daddy is as happy as you are."

The sun has sunken low enough that bugs have started to swarm any light. Duncan swats one or two little, buzzing things away from his face before he decides to go inside. The door handle sticks a bit and the door jam makes a creaking, popping noise as he pushes the door open. He's hardly halfway inside before he hears, "Daddy!"

Duncan shuts the door behind him with the extra effort to get it to close all the way. He then kneels down to catch Apricity as she flings herself towards him. Her soft, pudgy arms wrap around his neck and squeeze as hard as they can. Meanwhile, Duncan is a little more careful in how he hugs her back and a little quieter in how he greets, "Hello, April showers."

Will and Duncan have come up with all sorts of nicknames for their little one and then Molly added a few in addition to picking her own title – *Mimi or Auntie Molly*. Will has an affinity for *Miss Priss*, of course. Duncan found himself using *April showers* by accident one night when Apricity was teething and his brain was too exhausted to do much thinking. As he'd paced and rocked and soothed her, he'd whispered that old saying to her: *April showers bring May flowers*.

Apricity digs her forehead into his shoulder and announces against his chest, "Made you a

present for Daddy Day!"

"It's not Daddy Day yet, silly," Will reminds her from where they sit on the couch. They're wearing a black flowing dress with vibrant embroidered flowers across the chest and they have a single flower tucked into the braid of their hair. The flower might be a bit wilted from being picked before lunch or slept on during a nap.

"Do you want to show it to me anyway?" Duncan asks Apricity as he rubs her back.

Her nod isn't quite so rough, just brushing the bows affixed to her pigtail against his jaw ever so slightly. Duncan lifts her easily as he stands and sits on the couch beside Will with her in his lap. He anchors an arm around her middle as she reaches forward with both hands to grab the coloring book from the table. She's a little clumsy and a little reckless and Will has to catch a few stray colored pencils as they roll off the edge of the table.

The page that Will and Apricity colored together has a simple drawing of a dog and bubble letters that spell out: *Puppy*. Will has carefully colored in each letter while Apricity colored all across the puppy with no care for the lines.

"Beautiful, baby," Duncan says as he kisses her smooth, sleek hair. He then gives Will a look to let them know that the subliminal messaging isn't escaping his notice.

Her hands are a little too rough as she grips the book and tries to flip to a new page. "Make another one."

"We have to put the coloring away before dinner," Will reminds her.

"No, Zazzy," she insists and the pages crinkle under fingers like mini-earthquakes formed by her frustration.

"Miss Priss," Will says with a subtly warning sort of tone, not quite tsking their tongue but the effect might be fairly similar. "If we eat dinner now, we'll have time for a book before bed."

Apricity huffs and Duncan chuckles. She lets him take the coloring book from between her fingers and he lifts her again to bring her to the kitchen. After she allows dinner to go well, she snuggles against Will as they read her a book. It's a story she's heard enough times to not feel tempted to keep herself awake awaiting the ending. She falls asleep with her cheek squished enough to leave her lips open like a little fish. Her hair has grown to reach down around her shoulders when not in her pigtails and Duncan tucks a couple of strands behind her ear when he tucks her into her bed.

Some days it feels particularly remarkable that she's become so headstrong and willful. When she was born, there was so much worry that something could go wrong. Duncan remembers his hand shaking as Molly listed off instructions in his ear and how he'd tried to calm his nerves with every inhale and exhale of smoke. The fear of something being missing from the world has been eased ten-fold as Apricity has shown her strength and determination to thrive. Still, she's their precious little one and he'll always handle her with care and consideration.

When Duncan has had his fill of the aching love that just looking at her can bring to his heart, he turns away and walks back to where Will lies waiting on their bed. They haven't changed clothes for sleeping yet, seeming to have simply flopped back against the mattress and only moved enough to fold their hands together over their middle.

They tip their head to look at him and smile when they find him looking back. "You've gotten lax with your lurking," they tease.

Duncan hums and sits on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes. He unlaces his boots, tugging off one and then the other and then groaning in satisfaction before flopping back on the bed too.

Will laughs and turns over in bed enough to press against his side. They rest one leg over one of his and wrap one arm around his middle. They dig their forehead against his shoulder almost exactly like Apricity did and they tease, "Parenthood has slowed you down."

"You could have kept it a secret if you'd wanted," he reminds them as he reaches a hand to interweave his fingers into the braid of their hair. He enjoys the softness of their hair as he enjoys the soft press of their lips against his shoulder. Duncan takes a deep breath and sighs as he says, "I didn't know you were thinking about it."

Will tightens their arm and holds him closer. "I don't see why not."

Duncan hums. He suspects that Will might actually see why not. The two of them have certainly talked about it enough. It's not that Duncan is against having more children. That couldn't be further from the truth. What he *is* against is Will ever feeling like they had their opportunities limited.

"What would I do at college?" Will says for him. They've been good at knowing what he means for as long as Duncan has known them and the desperation to keep from waking a baby made them even better at communicating when saying nothing. "Why don't you go?"

Because Duncan doesn't have a clue what he wants to do. Taking over Walter's business maybe and then what? Duncan has always thought that a job would just be a thing that he does. He'll do it well, but it won't be his pride and joy or anything like that. He'll do the odd job and the hard job no problem and there's no need to go to college for that – at least, not anytime soon.

"You're smart," he says and really that's an understatement because *Will* could do great things. If life had gone differently, they could be well on their way to being a sought-after expert in something – understanding people, probably. Will feels and understands emotions in so many ways that they make it seem like *art.*

"So are you!" Will insists as they give him another squeeze.

"You could help people," Duncan clarifies. "Or something."

Will's squeeze this time is much more akin to a cuddle. "You *do* help people," they say. "There are two families held together by just how helpful you are."

Duncan sighs as he remembers to feel exhausted. He has risen before the sun rises and come home after the sun has set again. He's taken on more and more as Walter has gotten sicker and sicker. It started off with doing the last bit of the day on his own and then it was whole days and then it was a few days in a row with Walter too sick to do any delivering and now...

"Has Molly talked to you about it?" he asks, turning his head to kiss Will's forehead at the hairline.

"Walter?" they ask. "Or school?"

Duncan hums. "Yes."

"No news on Walter," Will says. "Molly worries I'll become resentful. *High Noon* and all that. I think she just needs something else to worry about."

That's probably true, Duncan knows. Molly is great at solving problems that need to be solved. She met two homeless teen parents-to-be and gave them a house in every way except *formally*. She gave them jobs with good pay and good, understanding bosses. She gave them a way to take care of their little one. On the day that little one was born, she'd given Duncan an opportunity to confess all his fears.

What's more challenging for Molly are problems she *can't* solve. As quick as she is on her feet, she can't make the medicine work differently or change the options. So, it's understandable if in the dead of night she'd rather think about how Will hasn't been able to learn everything college could offer them or enjoy the kinds of experiences that college life could bring. In the dead of night, Duncan thinks about that too.

"Will you resent me?" he asks. The last couple of words catch in his throat, choked up by saying the thought that's hurt him whenever he thinks it and sat on his chest as heavy as an anvil.

"You?" Will says, pushing themself up on their arm to look down at him from above.

Their hair falls over their shoulder and hangs down. Will hasn't cut it since Apricity was born, claiming to not have the time even though the salon is just across the street from the store. In some lights, Duncan might think their longer hair makes their cheeks look softer, but at other times, their cheekbones and jawline stand out as much as ever. They are truly beauty and handsomeness in one single person.

Will balances on one arm so that the other can brush the backs of fingers against Duncan's cheekbone. They smirk at him as they say, "I thought you were *listening* when you were lurking."

"I was," he says. He'd been listening more than anything else.

Will rises to straddle him and sit astride his hips. “How could I possibly *resent* you,” they murmur as they lean down close enough to kiss him. They hold back *just* enough to keep their lips hovering but not touching. “When what I want is for you to do it all over again?”

Duncan slides his fingers under the edge of Will’s dress and drags his hands up their back to spread his fingers wide and tug them closer. He holds on as tight as he can and holds them as close as can be. Though it feels like forever since, Duncan remembers just as clearly what it was like to feel Will’s belly pressing back against his with their baby tucked away inside. He misses that. It’s no secret.

Will lets Duncan kiss them, giving and takes with every press of their lips. Will twists their hips and rubs against Duncan’s cock as it hardens within the restriction of his jeans. In seemingly no time, Will has him moaning against their lips. They place their hands on either side of his jaw and brush their thumbs against his cheeks as they steal the air from his lungs. As much as cigarettes might be a soothing ritual, nothing else can compare to the way Will breathes life into him.

As vibrant and complex as they are, Will has never made him feel *boring* or *plain*. As far as Duncan can recall, Will has shown Duncan more love and attention than everyone else in his life combined and they do it *so well.* Will shows that same love to their child and Duncan has no doubt they would do the same with any more children they might have together. Will doesn’t seem to be running out of love to give; Duncan certainly doesn’t feel like he is.

“I want you to put another baby in me,” Will whispers against his lips. “We can enjoy doing it on purpose this time.”

Will barely gives Duncan time to process before they lean back to pull their dress up and over their head. Duncan’s cock is still throbbing in his pants and his heart is pounding as Will tosses the fabric aside. By the time it has settled in a heap on the bed, they’re already reaching for his belt buckle. He groans as their ass presses down against his cock, biting his lip when he starts to feel achingly impatient.

The skin of Will’s lower back is so soft under his hands. To have so much of Will so bare and there for him to appreciate makes him even more desperate to bury himself in them and give them another child to bear so beautifully. He wants to feel them unified and see Will grow with further proof of their union. He wants to merge with Will and be endlessly grateful that they let him leave a piece of himself behind.

He uses his hold at their waist to tumble them over in bed. Will lies back against the covers again, this time in nothing more than their black briefs. Carrying Apricity left behind some stretch marks on their belly and thighs though time has lightened them in color. Duncan takes in every detail even if he's seen Will many times before. Will licks and lips and smirks as they see how Duncan’s eyes linger on their nipple. Once his pants and boxers have been shoved past his hips and discarded, Will welcomes him with open arms. He licks across that nipple and kisses up their chest to lick and suck at the side of their throat too, Will gasping in his ear and bunching his shirt in their fists.

“Still gets me every time,” Will gasps into the air as Duncan sucks hard but not *too hard* that

it would leave behind a bruise for a curious mind to ask about. Will's tugs at his shirt are uncoordinated as they yank the fabric up his back. They groan and murmur, *"Take it off."*

Duncan tugs his shirt the rest of the way off and helps Will out of their underwear, slipping their little black briefs past the turn of their knees and down to their ankles. He also slips the elastic band from around the end of their hair and sets aside the flower even if it's gone fairly wilted already.

"Drunk teenagers at a party with a broken condom seems like a lifetime ago," Will muses breathily as Duncan's fingers trail lower and lower and down between their legs. "The drawer," they gasp sudden and strangled as he touches teasingly against their hole the way he knows they like. They must realize his disappointment before he can even give much thought to it because they clarify, "The lube."

Duncan reaches to grab the knob on the drawer at their bedside table. When his hand fishes blindly through the contents, he can bypass the condoms in their packets and find one of the bottles of lube instead. He doesn't waste any time in slicking up his fingers, pressing them against Will's hole, and then *in.* He kisses the staccato sounds from Will's lips both to muffle the noise and revel in how he can make them feel.

He's gotten to know Will's body in so many ways. He learned through touch as he dragged his hands across the dips, turns, rises, and falls on their body in the half-dark, hidden away from loud music and louder partygoers. He watched Will grow and change as they grew their child, birthed her, and recovered. Duncan has more to hold onto now than he'd had when they first started messing around and tumbling into bed together and he's glad for it.

"Duncan," Will moans, biting their lip and squirming their hips desperately to encourage his fingers deeper and harder.

The shift of their hips has their thigh rubbing against his cock. Will could help him muffle his groans too except for how their breaths come out as open-mouthed gasps. They get faster and more ragged until Will has to bite their lip to stifle their shouts. Their muscles flex and tremble so hard with their orgasm that Duncan could feel the twitch of their muscles as a vibration against his cock.

Duncan waits until Will's muscles have regained a bit of slack. Will rests their hand over their heart and he can easily imagine how it's still thundering in their ribcage. Their head lolls to the side and their eyes are half-closed in a contented sort of way as Duncan spreads their legs a little more for them. When he hooks a hand behind one knee and pushes it back towards their chest, Will smiles so softly at him that it's so startling that he might not be able to say why exactly.

As he sinks his cock deep into Will's hole and does it *bare*, he watches Will's pretty lips shape themselves around a whimper and a moan. With a slow pull out and indulgent push in again, he pulls a few more whimpers from the lungs underneath Will's hand. He braces his elbows at either side of their head and presses his body down against Will's until they might sink into the mattress. Then he really puts his all into it.

With every drag against his cock as he pulls out and thrusts in, he can feel *everything*. The condom has been a necessity, but being able to fuck in bare reminds him just how *satisfying* it is. There's nothing keeping them apart, nothing to discourage him from indulging the wants and desires that seem woven into his DNA.

"Does it feel different?" Will asks, through breathlessness and the punctuating jolt of his hips. They wrap their legs around his back and hook their feet together. "Knowing *exactly* what we're doing?"

"Yes," Duncan rasps with a throat that feels raw from all his groaning and grunts.

The broken condom that sent them on this wild adventure into the unknown and gave them their daughter brought dread and worry as soon as he realized it and when he remembered it again the morning after. There was a certain blame he felt. The condom seemed to be his responsibility and Will wouldn't be at risk of getting pregnant without his doing.

Will wraps their arms around his neck and, as they scratch their nails across his back, they murmur in his ear, "Tell me."

"I'll cum in you on purpose," Duncan groans, and his hips pick up speed at the thought. He squeezes his eyes closed and furrows his brow as all his focus is occupied by the feel of *Will.* He feels every squeeze against his cock and the slick slide that he hasn't been able to enjoy so thoroughly and fully since their baby was born. "Fill you up. Because you want another of my babies."

"Another," Will gasps, a demand and a promise. Their hole clenches around his cock as they dig their nails into his back a little harsher. "And maybe another after that. Guess it depends on you."

He slams his hips and sinks in as deep as he can as he spills and *spills.* Will's hole squeezes and clenches as if pulling as much from him as he can possibly give; he wants to give it all and *more*. He wants to fill Will as many times as it takes and then as much and as often as he can for the forty weeks afterward. He groans into the sweat-damp skin of Will's neck and buries his nose in the hair that's gone damp too along the nape of their neck and behind their ear.

His heart pounds in his chest even after they've pulled apart and cleaned up. He wraps his arms around Will as they drift to sleep and presses his palm against where he hopes their next child will have already started to grow. He drifts off into sleep with the ease that comes with exhaustion and rest becoming akin to a precious stolen moment.

On Father's Day, he'll wake up to Apricity yelling as she tackles him, and then when he gets up like she wants, he'll be rewarded for being so good with two gifts:

A rainbow t-shirt and a positive pregnancy test.

Chapter End Notes

Another fic that I finished months ago but still can't believe is finished 😭

There is a short little prequel for this fic that I did for a monthly prompt fill and that is scheduled to be posted in October. 😊

End Notes

A big thank you to Bee for beta reading and brainstorming ideas with me and answering a million questions!!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!